through a glass

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through a glass

by amare

Summary

He went to sleep in an asylum; he woke up in a reality not his own. Will's either gone down the rabbit hole of his own unstable mind, or he's ended up someplace else entirely. (The non-opaque summary: Will wakes up in a universe where he and Hannibal are dating.)

Notes

This is as close as my brain can get to domestic Hannigram, I think. Thanks to Macie, R, kyrene, to Randstad for being enthusiastic about my incoherent 4 a.m. emails, to J, and everyone else who helped me along the way.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The sun was in the wrong place. Will first noticed the shine of it as it turned the black of his closed eyelids into a splotchy kaleidoscope. His entire body went stiff against the gentle give of the mattress, which was the third aberration.

The first: his living room in Virginia faced west, so it took sunlight quite a while to reach him on winter mornings, the dogs following bars of warmth across the floor during its procession. The second: Will hadn't seen the sun in nearly two months. Not outside of his weekly accompanied walks around the fenced-in garden at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, anyway, stooped and favoring his still-healing left side.

He sat up, his heart starting an anxious kettledrumming. The covers fell from his chest to pool in his lap like a sheaf of water. It wasn't his bed. The thread count of the sheets on his bed back in Wolf Trap claimed to be five hundred, but he'd found them in a bargain bin, and Will remembered how they felt distinctly: crisp, thin, and cheap. The cot at the hospital had made them feel heavenly by comparison, but his current sheets were better than any hotel the Bureau ever put him in. They were outside of his tax bracket.

Will had gone to sleep in his hospital-issue white shirt and pants, his back aching from weeks of sleeping on a cot. He remembered what he'd eaten for dinner the night before—a gristly piece of chicken with a soggy ear of corn and tater tots. He remembered trying to tune out Miggs masturbating in his cell down the hall until he'd fallen unconscious. He remembered the weeks and months leading up to last night, with some patches of confusion and hallucination that were difficult to assemble into sense. Will had gone over the time with a fine-toothed comb to try to spot the traps Lecter had laid for him. Will had found most of them, though there were probably several that had yet to spring.

The bedroom; the buttery-smooth sheets; the fine furnishings; and the grey fireplace he could see from the bed, they all screamed one conclusion.

He had no idea how Lecter had managed to transport him from the hospital to his own guest room, but he'd accomplished it somehow. His ability to mold the universe to his own design had reached Mephistophelean levels that Will had forced himself to stop questioning.

The fact that he wasn't tied to the bed or drugged insensate was a shock. The previous night, he'd fallen asleep normally, no sign of a sedative, and he felt clear-headed this morning. The lack of precaution, the lack of side effects, was *wrong*. More than that, they were not risks Lecter would have taken. As good as Will had become at retroactively deciphering the traps, his ability to see them coming was still annoyingly rudimentary. Will swung his legs over the side of the bed, and his feet touched the exact spot where Lecter's rug met smooth tile.

When he glanced around the bedroom again, he realized that his first assessment of the room —subtly masculine, expensive, even lovely with its ocean colors and symmetry—was all wrong. It wasn't a guest room. It was too big, and, more importantly, Will *knew* that Lecter

slept in that production of a bed. The smell of him lingered on the pillows, that faint cedar. He spotted another door that led to an attached bath. Will could hear the shower running.

He nearly knocked the lamp off the bedside table in his shaky-handed search for a weapon. There was nothing too useful, but still more options than he would have allowed. Will would never have put a prisoner in a room filled with sharp-edged objects, crystal decanters, tiepins, or a heavy statue. He thought to go for the statue, but it was unwieldy and difficult to conceal.

As he skittered his hands across Lecter's dresser, he noticed them: his own cufflinks, the solitary pair passed down from his father when Will had graduated from high school. He stalled when he found them, flicked one over with his finger to verify that it was his own. There was no mistaking the white-gold squares. There was a tiny scratch on one that rendered the pair imperfect and unique.

They were an oddity, something Lecter probably lifted from Will's house in order to engineer a reaction. More than likely it was a taunt, Will decided. A reminder that Will was without his father, without family, without a legacy. That he was completely alone.

When he found two pairs of his own underwear in Lecter's dresser, Will's mouth firmed into a line of irritation.

He wondered if Lecter's goal was to incite Will to try to kill him again. To plant seeds that suggested Will had orchestrated his own escape, flown to Lecter's house, and tried to finish what he'd started in Minnesota. That was small-minded and bizarre, but the idea left a brackish tinge of irony under Will's tongue that rang of Lecter. He couldn't discount it, and no other theory made anything like sense. There was no way Jack and Chilton would have facilitated Will's release into Lecter's custody? Jack was a radical, he'd do almost anything for results, but his actions were textbook in their predictability. And Chilton was a petty control freak. There was no way he'd sign off on something that let Will out of his reach.

But Will's presence in Lecter's bedroom didn't fit, the more he thought about it, and neither did the cufflinks. He couldn't put his finger on the right answer. Every possible explanation he tried out was like trying to mash the wrong puzzle pieces together.

If Will did decide to bash Lecter's skull in with one of his decanters and attempt another escape, he'd prefer to do it in more than his underwear. He noticed some of his own clothes strewn atop one of the chairs near the foot of the bed. Will shoved his legs into his pants quickly, a small corner of his mind welcoming the familiarity after too long spent in a jumpsuit not quite his size. One of his undershirts was there as well, and that went on next. His still-fresh scar tissue pulled when he raised his arms, though adrenalin saved him from the twinge of pain he knew he'd ordinarily have felt.

Last to go on was his black sweater, inside-out in a hastily discarded bundle. He turned it the right way and found several long strands of dog hair clinging to the collar. A huge and terrible longing rose up and made him shake. He smelled his own familiar smell, Old Spice and dog and rural Virginia and the bitterness of engine oil.

Will tugged his sweater to lie flat and remembered in a flash the last time he'd worn it. He'd worn it to Minnesota. To the Hobbs house. He'd worn it on Garret Jacob Hobbs' kitchen floor

as blood trickled sluggishly from the hole that went through fabric and flesh and muscle. The same sweater, the one Will knew because he'd nearly frayed one of the cuffs, had no such hole. It had no evidence of mending, and no trace of dried blood.

Lecter might have been able to twist the universe to his whims, but he couldn't unfire a gun. He couldn't perfectly replicate Will's sweater or transport Will from an asylum to a bedroom with absolutely no evidence or motive. Will rubbed the scar under his clothes, reassuring himself that it was still there and that he was *not crazy*. Even if the circumstances told him he was, he'd spent enough time under Chilton's ineffective treatment and Lecter's sporadic needling to know that he was not crazy. He didn't feel like how crazy felt. His hallucinations were apart from reality, especially in retrospect, preternatural and haunting. But Will had never felt a stronger sense of reality, standing in Dr. Lecter's expensive bedroom.

He found himself pushing his finger harder against his arm, like he might have been able to poke a bullet-shaped hole into the fabric himself.

"Will?"

Will give in to his animal panic. He didn't whirl around, wide-eyed and nauseated and clearly on the verge of running. Lecter's voice had been normal, casual, and Will did his best to arrange his face to reflect something similar before swiveling around. He put his hands in his pockets and dipped his shoulders into the slouch he wore when he wasn't locked in a cage.

Hannibal Lecter stood in front of him wearing a royal blue robe, and he had a white towel draped over his shoulders like a rich woman's mink. In one hand he held a comb that he'd been using to style his wet hair. His expression was neutral, though his eyes were curious, and Will knew that he'd never before in his life seen Lecter wear a real expression. Not until that moment. He'd never seen anything but brilliant artifice. Even when Will had learned the truth, Lecter's face had still concealed most of it. Even as the jaws of his trap had snapped closed and shut Will inside of an asylum, as Lecter had smirked through the bars, he was still not honest.

Will swallowed. The world refused to right itself. He swallowed again.

"Leaving?" Lecter asked. Will watched his lips curl at the corners into the smallest hint of a smile, and it felt like watching muscle and sinew work under flayed flesh; Lecter seemed that thoroughly unmasked.

It took him a few moments to make his decision. He had next to no information that he could make sense of, and there was a good chance that Chilton had unleashed a new and actually effective torment-slash-treatment on him that he was experiencing the results of, but what choice did he have? Whoever, whatever he was dealing with, it wouldn't do Will any good or get him any answers if he started yelling. And Will knew Lecter could take him if he ran.

If this is a game, Will thought as though hearing his own thoughts from the opposite side of a wind tunnel, *I'll play along.*

"The dogs," he said awkwardly, lifting his uninjured right side in a shrug.

Lecter seemed to take that explanation as if it were expected. Maybe even routine. Will had not spent the night at someone's house in years, before his collection of dogs had spiraled semi-out of control, but he never had suffered hospitality with much grace.

But Will's cufflinks, his briefs, the easy way Lecter looked at him, his very location in the master bedroom. It was adding up to something impossible. A sickening feeling like he'd had in the Hobbs' kitchen started to roil in his stomach, and Will was so unarmed by what he was seeing, the stark truth and the impossibility of it together, that he couldn't even use his innate ability—whether his eidecking or his empathy—to navigate him through the situation.

Lecter saved him from having to construct another sentence (with Will's luck, it would have been *"Why was I in your bed?"*, and he didn't want to know the answer, not even if it involved sleeping off a hangover or monitoring him for seizures). "I'd offer to make us breakfast, but I'm running late."

His appetite had only recently begun to return after weeks of refusing food in the hospital. Now thick and bitter bile rose up in his gorge over the idea of eating. It had taken weeks of supplements and at one point a feeding tube until he could choke down the bland cafeteria food Barney sent into his cell three times a day.

Will managed a tight smile. "It's fine. Thanks."

Lecter adjusted his towel and studied Will, still curious but not yet confused. His gaze tracked Will's expression, the fit of his sweater, his tan pants, registered that his clothes had already been worn, presumably the night before, and his eyebrows pulled together the smallest amount. Not enough to suggest disapproval, Will noted. "There's a fruit salad in the fridge. You're welcome to it. I'll be finished soon."

"Okay," Will said as Lecter closed the bathroom door behind him, not quite quickly enough to conceal the flash of bare shoulder Will saw as he'd begun to disrobe.

Jesus. The level of intimacy implied by that gesture just added to the pile of Will's mounting suspicions—his *batshit insane* suspicions.

Will waited until he heard the clatter of toiletries against the counter and unstuck his feet from the floor. He left the room, filing what he knew of it away for later, resisted the urge to take his cufflinks with him in his pocket, and took the stairs until he was back in an area of Lecter's house that he recognized.

If there was any lingering doubt that Lecter was somehow the same and had staged an elaborate performance, it was gone when he saw the rest of the house. It was the same space, with the same colors, the same furnishings, the same aesthetic. But it was slightly *more*. Will noticed art hanging on walls that he'd never seen in Lecter's home before, less *Leda and the Swan* and more impressionism. A half-read newspaper was left waiting on the edge of a chair. His own pair of shoes was by the front door, laces trailing to the floor. Will unlocked the door itself and then tried the handle. It swung open with no fanfare. A bite of icy air hit him in the face, strong enough to water his eyes.

Will leaned out of the threshold, checking the street for a car or a bullet-riddled van patched up with Bond-O, but there was nothing. A few high-end cars that clearly belonged in Lecter's neighborhood, no one in them, with a layer of ice thick enough on each to suggest an overnight presence. His own Volvo sat in the driveway, a crust of ice on its windshield as well. There was no one stationed on any nearby roofs, no one pretending to read meters or repair phone lines. Will glanced down at his own shoes, still discarded by the doorway, and shook his head. He closed the door to his freedom. It wouldn't be that easy.

And if he were inside his own head, he was in no real danger.

Will almost laughed at that. His mind was not somewhere he'd readily call a *safe* place.

He made his way into the kitchen for a final comparison. There was a bowl of fruit on the steel island, fresh bananas and mangos and even a kiwi, and a coffee mug by the sink. Will knew it was his mug, that some version of Will Graham had bought it, but he knew that *he* hadn't. The mug had been selected specifically to sit in Lecter's kitchen, to be used by Will in Lecter's home. Will saw that he'd made an effort to match it to Lecter's taste but had fallen short.

A creeping numbness gradually washed his brain clean of thoughts, the question of his own sanity chief among them. Will heard Lecter's footfalls on the stairs. He shook himself out of his stupor.

He considered the myriad of knives he knew Lecter kept, all of them sharp and gleaming to perfection. He discarded the idea more quickly than he had the thought of running away. He was still weak from undernourishment, still healing from a gunshot wound and fucking encephalitis, and shaken to his bones. If he wasn't going to run out of the door—and straight into a squad car and then back into Chilton's psychotropic arms, if it all was some elaborate game—he wasn't about to pull a weapon he wasn't very skilled with.

Lecter wore a suit Will had never seen, a checkered brown plaid with a plain—but silk—blue tie. Will watched as he was noticed standing in the kitchen, a stock-still figure with a blank look on his face, and he braced himself. Lecter in any universe, even in Will's own bitter mind, could immediately spot something that didn't belong.

But Lecter just offered him another half-smile and opened the fridge to reveal a stacked set of tupperware. "Give my regards to the dogs." He said it with such intimacy that Will was unsettled again. He leaned in, retrieved his tupperware, and opened the leather bag he'd slung over his shoulder to carry it in.

Occupied with his own minor juggling act and progression to the hall, Will at a careful following distance, he failed to notice Will's veil of an expression. When he righted himself, standing in the same spot Will had occupied earlier, just in front of his shoes, he glanced back up. "I'll see you tonight after your appointment?" He spoke casually, rolled the words around on his tongue with as much ease as Lecter's muddled European accent ever managed, but it was a question. Their dining together wasn't always a given, Will surmised. He wasn't a sure thing for a dinner companion.

Agreeing took a lot of effort. He nodded, a flicker of an uncomfortable smile on his face that he was extremely glad wouldn't be unfamiliar to anyone who'd met him, and Lecter returned his nod.

"I'll make dinner, then." He closed his bag with a quiet punctuating snap. He looked as though he was considering something, head tilted slightly. Regarding Will, sizing up Will's appetite and preferences like Will might have sized up a crime scene. "Fish or duck, whatever's freshest at the market. With a pilaf, I think."

Will's stomach lurched. Eating, and doing it in Lecter's company, no matter how apparently benign, was an unbearable idea. "Sounds good."

Lecter took a coat down from his rack, gray Herringbone, and draped it across his arm. He carried himself with an efficiency of movement that was familiar, at least, but he was less obvious about it than the version of Lecter Will knew.

"Eat something," he said, a reminder and an admonition. He leaned in, and Will finally felt the thunder to confirm his earlier lightning strike of realization. Will trembled with the effort not to move away, but Lecter only touched the bones of Will's wrist in a fond gesture of farewell. Will suppressed an unpleasant shiver as the dry, soft pads of Lecter's fingers took their time in parting with Will's skin. "Lock up when you leave."

He was gone. Will waited in the hall for his breathing to return to normal, for belief in his own sanity to return to him. The first did, but the latter remained elusive.

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I woke up in Hannibal Lecter's bed, Will thought, gripping the banister too tightly as he made his way back upstairs. *And I think he almost kissed me before he left for work. Not a big deal.*

Never mind the idea that he'd woken up somewhere alien in the first place. Or that he'd woken up under the haze of some cocktail Chilton had slipped him, those rodent eyes observing every twitch and exhale Will made on a medical bed as he washed down bitter pain pills with sips of coffee. Will didn't believe in much, but on a scale of Chilton's experimentation to something supernatural, he'd put his money on Chilton.

That just left the question of what his own mind thought it was doing, with regards to the Lecter situation. Or how he'd managed to make it seem so real.

He paused in the upstairs landing, his ascent having nearly winded him. The door to the master bedroom was still ajar, but Will could see that Lecter had made up the bed before he'd left. Of course he had.

The room seemed to swallow him when he entered it, gently guiding him inside of its luxurious maw. Will seemed tugged as if by a leash toward the bed again. He knew, he already knew that whatever he was dealing with was exactly what it looked like, but he slid the drawer of Lecter's night table open anyway and found the lube and condoms. He'd known he was going to find them. He'd known since Lecter had walked out of the bathroom, droplets

of water sliding down his neck, in a state no one but an *intimate* would have ever seen Lecter in.

They fucked each other. Will exhaled and sunk down to sit on the bed in the same moment, rubbing at his face. Wherever he was—no. Will had invented a reality in his head where he and Lecter fucked each other.

The drawer remained open, the condoms and lubricant evidence on Lecter's side of the bed, within easy reach. The lube was used to around halfway down the bottle, but the condoms—those had a thin, almost invisible layer of dust on their box. Breath held, Will leaned in and flipped the box lid open. Two or three were missing, which suggested the dust-free lube was used more often than the condoms. Okay.

It was such a small thing, but it gave him a flare of relief. Something to cling to, an answer that he could live with knowing. *We fuck, but we don't fuck that often.* Lecter was a fastidious man, and Will was—would still have been—reticent, even in his imagination. The two of them were busy, always working. Which meant Will could last the day, if he were there that long, if he didn't snap out of it, or maybe he could go even longer without having to let Lecter touch him. *A week? Do people in relationships go a week without sex?*

There was nothing else helpful in Lecter's bedroom. Will knew that without having to look, but he did a cursory search anyway. Lecter's walk-in closet was a museum exhibit, organized by season and by color, and his collection of shoes was almost embarrassing. His bathroom had an old-fashioned shaving kit, freshly used, on the counter, and Will recognized his own preferred brand of electric razor sitting in a charger on the opposite end of the sink. He hissed disgusted air from between his clenched teeth. Products, none of them with labels in English, filled the cupboards.

Downstairs yielded few results. The kitchen was roughly the same as Will remembered it. Lecter kept no paperwork in a junk drawer, not even a manual for one of his many complicated cooking implements. He moved on to the rest of the house, most of it unfamiliar to him.

There were two guest bedrooms, both smaller than the master but just as well decorated. Or well decorated by Will's estimation. One and a half baths aside from the master. A library and study, a more condensed version of what his office resembled. Will found his own cell phone charging in the sitting room, and he swept his hand across its plastic face fondly.

Will deliberately left the basement for last. Long weeks of recovery meant he'd had nothing to do but think. To deconstruct Lecter's design. He figured that if Lecter was killing people, and he knew for certain he was the Copy-Cat, he'd use his home as a base. Lecter was too smart and too organized to leave evidence in his garage, but his basement was far harder to access and received less foot traffic.

Lecter's basement was unlocked. Will sighed and pushed the door open. If it was unlocked, there was nothing down there. No revelation Will's mind had thoughtfully cooked up, and not even a heavy-handed metaphor. The Lecter he'd designed wasn't the Copy-Cat. He hadn't framed Will for murder, and he didn't have any extra-curricular activities worth hiding.

The lighting in the basement was good, not some bare bulb hanging in dank darkness. Will swept his gaze across the expanse of the large room. It would be interesting to see what sort of shit he'd dream up to entertain himself, if anything.

If he wasn't dreaming… It still wasn't worth considering.

Plastic-covered furniture was pushed against the walls. Antique lamps, a piano wrapped in the same plastic as the furniture, some projects Lecter must have started and set aside. A broken harpsichord. It was entirely boring; the full lighting removed any hint of leftover creepiness that could come from a room filled with the remnants of someone's life. There wasn't even the occasional skittering of rats.

Will spotted two tall file cabinets near the basement stairs on his way out, and he opened them out of curiosity more than anything else. He halfway expected his own childhood drawings to appear, maybe one of those goddamn clocks Lecter had made him draw. But there were only neatly-labeled files. Old patient files. Will flipped through the first few just to make certain, but nothing jumped out at him.

Until he saw his own name. *Graham, William.* He slid his file out from its place amongst the other Gs. When he opened it, the letter rubber-stamping Will to return him to active duty from their first session was the first page. The second, Will noted with an emotion not unlike intrigue hooking into his stomach and tugging softly, was a consent form.

I hereby give consent for my psychiatrist—Dr. Hannibal Lecter was scribbled in with Will's own penmanship—*to utilize the content of my sessions for the purposes of review and supervision. I authorize him to do the following (check all that apply):*

___ *audio record sessions*
___ *review and discuss my sessions with Agent Jack Crawford*

Both were checked, and Will had dutifully signed off on the whole thing. It was a curious find. His experience with Lecter hadn't involved any consent forms, and there had been no audio devices—obvious ones, anyway. He had assumed Lecter had a mind like his own and had no need of reminders. Will wondered what he was trying to tell himself, if the form was a breadcrumb he was supposed to follow.

He put the file back once it proved to be less than useful—all of the notes on him were held elsewhere, as far as Will could tell, and it was those that Will was truly interested in.

Upstairs again, he made another circuit of the house, letting his mind try to unspool the situation without the distraction of urgency or Lecter himself.

He had limited options. He could investigate the situation until he traced it back to Chilton or the FBI—highly unlikely, least on his list of priorities. He could attempt some kind of escape—not useful, especially since Will was probably in an altered state of some kind. He could play along, following whatever path of events his mind put down in front of him, brick after curious brick. He could hope to wake up in several hours, nauseated from the meds and in no state to deal with Chilton's attempts at therapy.

Whatever he chose, it was best to avoid anything that could lead to institutionalization. Will's body was likely still locked up in an asylum; his dreaming mind didn't need to end up there alongside it.

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Will was on I-95 within thirty minutes of Lecter leaving.

He didn't think of himself as a terribly sentimental person. His belongings were sparse by most accounts; he required very little, only specific things, to keep himself occupied. But his dogs were a lodestone, and he'd gone *months* without them. If the body he inhabited wasn't literal, though it demanded food and drink and felt things as keenly as he did awake, he still clothed it, would feed it, and would keep it from harm. If he endeavored to do that, a human instinct Will couldn't shake, he would certainly drive an hour and a half back to Wolf Trap, to his own territory. To his dogs.

When he pulled up, mid-morning sun starting to melt the ice on his roof, they didn't claw at the door or bark for his attention. To his dogs, he'd been gone a night, not enough cause for more than a brief cold shoulder until he put out their morning food and took them on a walk. Still, his hands fumbled with the key as he put it into the lock, and at the first brush of a tail against his pant leg, Will fell to his knees. He didn't care if it was a dream.

"Christ," he huffed, the bottoms of his glasses fogged but thankfully not wet. He stayed where he was for a very long time, hands buried in fur, hot dog breath on his face. When he finally stood, Winston led the pack of them toward the door expectantly, and Will let them out with a reminder to behave that crackled in his throat like an ember.

Normally, he went outside with them, but Will had multiple purposes in Wolf Trap. His cell phone was the cheapest he had been able to convince Jack to give him, barely a smartphone. He used his laptop for everything else he needed: ordering parts to tinker with, compiling PowerPoints, watching nature documentaries. He often left it at work when he was lecturing, the carelessness almost passive-aggressive, like he was daring himself to lose it. No one had ever taken it, and he found it charging on the floor near his bed.

Seated where he made those damn lures, most of them still scattered across the desk, Will searched for "Will Graham." Almost all of the results led back to TattleCrime.com. He clicked the most recent, ignoring the photo of him at the Stammets crime scene that Freddie seemed so attached to using, and skimmed it for anything that stood out. He did not recall having read that particular article when awake, but that meant nothing. Will tried another one and stopped short when he saw the picture of Abigail Hobbs being wheeled into an ambulance, Hannibal Lecter at her side, mouth turned down in a subtle show of distress.

So his mind had done him the favor of rescuing him from captivity, but it hadn't erase Garret Jacob Hobbs.

The sight of Abigail alive arrested him for a few moments, and he knew he wouldn't be able to stop his gathering of facts until he determined that his mind hadn't left her to her ultimate fate.

The Shrike Raids His Own Nest, Lounds had written in her lurid red font. The article made little mention of Lecter, though tellingly it also included no mention of a mysterious phone call. Mrs. Hobbs apparently died in the living room, not on the front porch. Will rearranged the memory in his mind to account for the difference. Why he hadn't spared her, he didn't know.

Hobbs hadn't been warned, but he and Lecter had still ended up walking into a crime scene. He wondered if Lecter had sat at Abigail's bedside, or if that investment was exclusive to the murdering version of him.

He went back to the search and typed in "Hannibal Lecter." Those results were a mixture of academic journals, a link to a *Psychology Today* profile, a list of donors to some fund at Johns Hopkins, and a staggering amount of mentions on the society page of the *Baltimore Sun*.

Hesitantly, he tried "Hannibal Lecter Will Graham" and leaned back with a shaky exhale when the first result was for the Baltimore Sun, the second for Tattle Crime. The picture was the star of the article. In it were Dr. Hannibal Lecter and his companion to the benefit, Special Agent Will Graham of the FBI. Will wore a modest but well-cut tuxedo that he would not have bought for himself, all of the jacket buttons left undone, and his expression was stiff and blank. Beside him, Lecter smiled vaguely for the camera and touched the small of Will's back with his hand. Will could almost feel the heat of it searing his skin through his clothes.

He stared at it for a minute. Will plucked off his glasses and dropped them to the desk with a clatter, scrubbing over his tired eyes with his palms. He blew out another shaky breath. Finally, he laughed, a bark of amusement and discomfort. "Goddamn. You have"—he worked the word around in his mouth, weighing it and finding it lacking for the scope of his incredulity—"problems, Graham."

It took him a while to notice, because he was still shaking his head and smothering dark chuckles, still staring at his own face, at Lecter's familiar touch and the way his own body turned into it, and he couldn't stop thinking *I invented this?*. But eventually he saw Tobias Budge off in the background of the picture, standing near a table lined with food Will wouldn't have eaten if he'd actually attended. Others might have called the look on his face haughty, or even detached. They'd have been wrong. The look was cold calculation, his eyes fever-bright and trained directly on Will's back. It was as if he didn't even see Lecter.

He checked the date. The photo had been taken two weeks earlier, going by the clock on his computer. By Will's estimation, Lecter had killed Tobias Budge months before then.

In the depths of Will's subconscious, Abigail Hobbs was probably still alive, but so was Tobias Budge. And Will was fucking Hannibal Lecter.

Will slammed the laptop shut and went out to throw sticks for his dogs. His own psychosis could wait.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Staring into the depths of his fridge, Will's hand squeezed the handle so tightly that it creaked a protest. He'd only meant to grab himself something small, something manageable, because even if he was asleep he was still light-headed with hunger. A few bites of a crappy breakfast sandwich nearly seven hours earlier hadn't done him any good.

"Shit," Will muttered, slamming the door closed. Things rattled. Things that sounded like they were made of glass. Maybe the three bottles of salad dressing he apparently owned.

His fridge was stocked. The shelves weren't overflowing, but normally his fridge contained takeout containers, the odd piece of a fruit, a few old condiment jars, and meat he cooked with rice and some vegetables for the dogs. He called it puppy stir-fry, and most of the pack liked to swirl around his heels while he cooked it—anything that wasn't from a forty-pound bag of kibble was a treat.

Will's fridge was a *treat*, one given to him by someone who knew him well enough to deduce that he had a hard time turning away perishables. It was an easy trick, one of the counselors at one of his many middle schools had used the same thing: *"Oh, Will, I brought too much to eat by myself, why don't you help me with some of it?"* And hungry, small for his age Will Graham did, because *"we don't waste food, Willy,"* and otherwise it was terrible school lunches for him if he had enough quarters that day. He got to sit with the counselor in her office, too, away from the boomingly noisy and frightening cafeteria.

It's my goddamn head. Lecter knew to give me this shit because ***I*** *knew I'd take it. It's my own head.*

Opening the fridge again, he pulled out an apple and bit into it as he surveyed the rest of the first floor, a welcome sight after nothing but bars and concrete. His bed was unmade, a sleepy dog resting at the foot of it. Will's house was never exactly messy, but one or two corners of it always held clutter; a pile of books he'd started to read and discarded, a boat engine, whatever. The dogs were fairly well behaved, but no dog owner could live without some kind of mess, be it paw-prints or dander. Will had often found dog hair in the oddest places, most often from between his teeth while eating. His apple was untainted so far, though. It was fresh, probably from a local organic vendor, and he had to slurp to keep juice from running down his wrist.

He'd changed into a plain T-shirt once he'd come back inside because the very reminder of the sweater resting against his skin made him feel claustrophobic. It was a clear indication of something that *didn't belong*, and he didn't care if the claustrophobia was psychosomatic. When he went rummaging for the shirt, he'd found a few things that he knew he didn't buy, outfits to better assimilate at Lecter's side, but the tux Will saw in the photograph was nowhere to be found. He'd frowned and tossed a heather green V-neck shirt made of some

soft material onto the floor in front of his dresser. *Let the dogs use it as a bed, I don't give a shit.*

Will sat down at his desk again, thumbing one of his lures while he finished his apple. He marveled over his own brain's ability to replicate the sensation. His eerie hallucinations were long gone, dissipated by antibiotics, but he thought he would have appreciated seeing a feathered stag just as a definitive reminder of unreality.

"Okay," he said, chucking the core at a garbage pail near his desk. He heard a soft huff of one of the dogs responding to his voice, too loud for the room. *Tobias Budge, how many more people have you killed?*

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He got to Quantico around six-thirty, ignoring the voice in the back of his head that wondered why the time hadn't been swallowed up into the flow of the dream, and he tried to make his way over to a computer unseen by anyone who mattered. Unfortunately for Will, even the Jack Crawford of his dreams had a bloodhound's nose.

Jack barked Will's name just as Will was about to access confidential files on the Budge case. He swiveled around in his chair, his I.D. badge a visible reminder that Will was completely allowed to use the FBI's computers, even if the back of his own neck was prickling with sweat.

"Hi, Jack," Will said easily enough. The last time he'd seen Jack was when he'd come to the asylum to talk about testifying at Will's upcoming trial for the prosecution. It had been half courtesy and half threat. Will struggled to keep the poison of that memory from visibly spreading.

"Why didn't you check your cell phone?"

Will glanced down at his own pocket. He'd forgotten it was there, not an uncommon occurrence, but he was rusty after months of not having one to hand. "I forgot." He fished it from his pocket and turned it on, his gaze successfully averted from Jack's as it booted up and chimed at him. He had four missed calls and five text messages, and a pre-programmed reminder that read *DM, 5:30.* Will squinted at it, but nothing clicked.

Two of the calls were from Jack. One was from an unknown number, and the last from Lecter. His voicemail had new messages. Jack was speaking, so Will did his best to tune to his frequency.

"—while you've been doing God knows what, we've been trying to get actual work done. I tried to get you the crime scene *fresh*, Will, but Baltimore P.D. only has so much goddamn patience."

"I was busy," Will said, because he was. "I got caught up. In research."

"*Research.*" Jack deliberately stood in the way of foot traffic, an immovable object that nervous agents and the odd trainee had to make a wide circuit to avoid. If he couldn't directly

unsettle Will, he'd unsettle everyone else in the room, let Will feel the room fill up with anxiety. "At least tell me it was on the Maestro."

The Maestro. Will had a guess as to who that was and which intrepid and unimaginative reporter gave him that name. His lips pursed into a displeased smile. "Yeah, it was on the Maestro." He gestured to his screen, which displayed crime scene diagrams from the murder of Douglas Wilson. "I had some ideas."

"You have ideas, you bring them to me. We work the leads as a team." He folded his arms across his chest. He'd calmed slightly; Will disappearing into a black hole of conjecture wasn't uncommon and might have been forgivable, but he was still pissed Will had failed to show up at a crime scene when beckoned. That he'd had to stand there in front of local law enforcement and the forensics team, phone pressed to his ear, nagging his rogue special agent like a kid late for their curfew. Will could picture it clearly and knew it would be a while before he was finished paying for the indignity. "You go AWOL on me again and I won't let you off with a warning."

"This is a warning?" Will asked.

"*No*, this is not a warning, I haven't gotten to that part yet. I called Dr. Lecter, and he said he hadn't seen you since this morning—" Will's stomach thrashed like a beached fish. Jack knowing to call Lecter for his whereabouts was fucked up, "—or you'd be in more trouble for lying to me."

"I don't lie to you," Will said, using the technical truth of it to infuse his voice with earnest affront. *I smudge the truth, when necessary. Or when it's the only thing keeping Abigail Hobbs from prison.* It didn't help Will's simmering resentment that Jack had bought Lecter's bullshit hook, line, and sinker. He remembered Jack staring at him through the bars, so uncharacteristically calm and soft-spoken, not sure if he was supposed to treat Will like someone who'd snapped, something to be pitied, or someone who'd played him. Someone to be played in return.

Jack gave him an extremely black look. The look had to do with Lecter, Will knew that much, but he wasn't going to regale Will with the details. Not again. So it was an old argument, then, sanded down into part of their normal discourse. The relationship between Will and Lecter? Maybe they'd tried to conceal it and had been discovered. That was the likeliest explanation. "If you ignore my phone calls again, in the middle of a *murder investigation*, you're not teaching another class until 2016. You're lucky I can't afford to bench your ass."

"Yeah," Will agreed. "I've got—stuff, can we consider me officially warned?" Jack responded better when Will sounded tired, although it was a crapshoot at that point, figuring out what would work. "I can head to the crime scene after—"

"Crime scene's *gone*, Will, they've already sent a team to clean it up. Katz and Price have the body."

Will shifted under Jack's piercing look, his jutted chin. For the first time, he felt a wince of embarrassment somewhere in his mind. He reminded himself that there was no such thing as

unprofessionalism in a dream. That everything he did and did not do was only for his own catharsis. "Well, I'll go see Katz and Price and the body after, then."

Jack was silent for a few more moments, eyes narrowed. Finally he gave a noiseless sigh. "I mean it, Will, you ignore me again and I'll have your ass. Lecter and Du Maurier can shove it."

He walked off, regular foot traffic resumed, and Will swiveled his chair back to face the computer screen, his hand still holding his cell phone and tapping it anxiously on his knee. He stopped himself from making the motion and brought the phone up to study it. *DM, 5:30.* Du Maurier? He'd never heard the name before, but it was an obvious fit, an association his brain might have made. He still didn't know what the 5:30 referred to, other than some kind of appointment or engagement.

Most of the text messages were from Jack, managing to scream at him without properly typing one single word. Jack hated texting; he claimed that each of his fingers took up the whole keypad, and every text Will received from him was a lesson in decryption. The most recent was from Lecter.

Are you all right?

Will chewed the inside of his cheek, canine nipping a little hard and too close to the sensitive skin on the inside of his lip. Will set the phone aside, messages unheard and texts unresponded to, and focused on Tobias Budge again.

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Will spent another hour like that, immersed in *the Maestro's* latest kills. He had to give himself credit for his own skill in inventing them; they were exactly along Budge's lines, with a little tweak here and there Will didn't completely see coming. He'd tried hanging a corpse with the piano wire, but that hadn't been entirely successful, and he'd had to improvise another support system on the spot to complete his tableau. Will intended to use that unplanned change to catch him, to follow the piano wire lead from that crime scene back to Budge's music shop. He was also going to go in there with a goddamn SWAT team. He wasn't going to take any chances.

It's a nice thought, getting to redo my mistakes.

Half past seven, his phone trilled, and Will jerked in his chair. The caller ID said 'Hannibal home.' The agent next to him sighed heavily when he pressed 'talk' and signed off of the computer she was logged in to. Will watched her walk down the hallway to another room, annoyance in every step, as he brought the phone up to his ear.

"I'm not dead," he said in lieu of a hello, a combination of wariness, nerves, and irritation making him even less willing or able to play the social game than usual. He added a "sorry" after he had a moment to reevaluate.

There was a pause from Lecter's end. Will adjusted the phone against his ear in case he could hear him breathing. He couldn't. "I'm relieved to hear as much," he said slowly. "Bedelia

called to tell me you missed your appointment and her attempt to reach you had failed, and then Agent Crawford called to ascertain your whereabouts."

"Yeah, uh, I think I had a breakthrough on the Maestro case, lost track of time. Research. And I—my phone was off." Will made a face at himself. "I didn't mean to put anybody out."

Another pause. Will heard the rustle of something in the background. "Are you sure you're all right? You sound shaken." Actual concern sculpted Lecter's voice into something quiet and appealing, Will was discomfited to notice.

"I'm fine," Will said. "I have a lot to do, and Jack needs me to go look at the body they brought back when I'm done with it."

"I'm glad you're well. I was concerned," Lecter said. "So was Dr. Du Maurier."

Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier, Will thought. *Lecter used her first name, and if he did they're friends. So Bedelia Du Marurier's a doctor, his colleague. Bingo.* "I can imagine. Me missing a session, that's wasn't—good."

"No, it wasn't." Will heard another rustle, then the sizzling of butter, and he put it together.

"But, um, how are you?" Will asked when Lecter seemed to be in no hurry to speak. "Is that dinner?"

"Yes, it's dinner. Roast duck with pomegranate molasses and the pilaf I mentioned this morning." Will nodded, realized what he'd done, and made a noise of assent into the phone. "Will, the drive is quite long, and if Jack must still monopolize your time, it's probably best that we reschedule dinner."

The bit about Jack was particularly snide. Will could have explained the resentment if he'd been awake, if he were dealing with the Lecter he knew to be the copy-cat, but there was no explaining Lecter's distaste if he wasn't attempting to force a wedge between Will and Jack. "You're probably right." He stuttered his way through an apology and a promise to call Dr. Du Maurier and reschedule the next morning.

"I would call her tonight," Lecter said. "I doubt she's gone home. She was very concerned."

"Right. I will." Will hesitated. Normally he said some quick version of goodbye and hung up the phone, but he normally he didn't endure phone calls wherein he had to reassure a worried Lecter of his safety. *This isn't real, it doesn't matter what I say,* Will thought with a swell of irritation. "Bye," he said sharply, and he ended the call.

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Bedelia Du Maurier had her own search engine results, and only a few of them led to the society pages. He learned that she was an expert in psychopathology and specialized in treating adolescents, though clearly she saw adults as well. She was located in Baltimore, not too far from Lecter's office, which explained Lecter's morning surety about seeing Will again that evening for dinner.

Will looked at her picture as he dialed her number. Taken at some charity foundation gala, she posed with a glass of champagne in a muted gold dress. Her face was as lovely as a pristine frozen lake and about as warm.

"Mr. Graham," she said when she answered. The voice somewhat matched the lake, but it had a bit more give. More music. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks. I'm sorry for missing our appointment. And for failing to answer your call. Sometimes I get," he cleared his throat, "a little preoccupied."

She accepted his apology graciously and allowed him to reschedule for the next week, her syrup-smooth voice appropriately obliging in his ear. He was pinged with interest when she used virtually the same wording Lecter had, "we were concerned," and an infinitesimal part of him warmed when he realized that she actually was concerned and it wasn't just polite lip service.

She finished the call with "say hello to Dr. Lecter for me," though, and the warmth disappeared.

Will wondered how and when she became his psychiatrist, because clearly Lecter passed that duty some time ago. He thought that maybe it was nice that his subconscious aimed to keep their *relationship* above-board, absolving them of any wrongdoing or conflict of interest by shunting him off to Dr. Du Maurier. Will knew that the Lecter outside of his own head wouldn't allow Will out of his realm of psychiatric influence, not for all the expensive Italian shoes and fine dining in the world.

--

Katz and Price were milling around their examination tables, still wearing their lab gear, very obviously ordered by Jack to stay put until Will was done viewing the Maestro's latest victim. Price perked up when he saw Will walk in, but Katz's posture still retained the resigned slump of somebody who'd had to cancel plans.

"Hey, Will," Katz said. She did a good job of keeping her irritation to herself, but he'd ruined her night. He gave her a smile of an apology to let her know, and she inhaled, perked up a little. Got down to business. "John Doe—there wasn't any identification at the scene, so we're still compiling biometics, and IAFIS hasn't sent back a match yet—thirty to thirty-five, Zeller confirmed cause of death was strangulation with one of the piano wires." Katz stopped and tilted the victim's head with one gloved hand to better show Will the wound, a neat slice to the bone. "Nearly decapitated him."

"There were a lot of unique prints at the scene, so we might find one from the Maestro amongst all the chaos." *You won't*, Will thought. *Budge is better than that, and my mind isn't going to leave such obvious evidence*. "No DNA except for the victim's, and let me just tell you, piano wire's a *bitch* to process," said Price, and according to Katz's flick of an eye roll, not for the first time.

Will circled the body, taking in the particulars. White male, a victim type Budge seemed to favor, though that was most likely because people in his social circle were WASPS more often than not. Calluses on his hands that suggested some kind of musicianship, but they didn't look thick or old enough to suggest he was a professional. Will didn't care much about the victim profile; he'd identified the unsub, and the victim was only a projection of his own mind, just a stepping-stone. Whatever details Will had invented were only to fit Budge's M.O.

"Nothing viable off of the rope," Katz said. "Apparently it came out of the church storage. And it's available for a couple bucks in any home improvement store nationwide. I don't think we're getting any leads there."

Will shook his head. "The rope isn't important. The piano wire is. It's how we'll catch him. He only used the ropes because the piano wire proved to be too effective at—cutting things rather than holding them up." Budge was smart, but he'd never tried to suspend anyone before, not for this purpose. "The majority of the victim's weight was supported by rope, not by wire. He used the wire decoratively, for effect. He didn't bring the rope with him. Rookie mistake. He's good, though; he won't make one like this again."

"I wonder if there's any significance to the location," Price pondered. "I mean, if you were killing someone in a church, wouldn't you want to crucify them? But I guess that's the *obvious* choice."

"There's definitely no Christian symbolism, obvious or otherwise," Katz said.

Will tuned them out. The location, whether his own creation or Budge's, was incidental. His first known kill, Douglas Williams, was ostensibly an invitation to another killer, the audience he performed for, but it functioned as more than that; it was part of his escalation. Budge was an artist, he was trying things out, and he'd decided that his most recent victim didn't deserve the presentation of a stage. The church was merely convenient. It was deserted and in a neighborhood filled with empty, foreclosed homes, so Budge knew he had time and some privacy to work.

Will spent some time observing the body, the neat cuts the wire had left. He occasionally asked a soft question to keep up the appearance of fact gathering, filling the air because it was expected. He already knew how he was going to proceed, but he had to wait for Jack to put things in motion.

Twenty minutes later, Jack arrived, walking so fast his unsecured tie swished around with each step. He was still seething, but the body in the room made it that much easier for him to focus. Will didn't stand upon ceremony, immediately giving him a profile that described Budge to a T. He knew they'd been following the catgut lead, but they hadn't checked out nearly enough music shops to stumble onto Budge so far, and Will needed his profile to be enough of a red flag to request SWAT assistance later, when they reached Budge on the list of potentials.

Once he finished, Katz and Price were out the door, waving limp-wristed goodbyes in their desire to finally leave. Jack was leaning against an empty examination table, and he looked like tired shit under the harsh fluorescent lights. He was alert and thoughtful, though, a hand

to his face, regarding Will over the edge of his finger as it rested against his nose. He dropped his hand. "Seems like you have a pretty clear picture of this guy."

Will shrugged. "He's not making any effort to conceal himself or his methods. I told you before, look for somebody with a music store, somebody who's a professional in the field. The piano wire would have been a dead giveaway this time, if we hadn't already made the connection."

"If Dr. Lecter hadn't made the connection, you mean," Jack said slowly, his eyebrows daring Will to argue.

"Well, yeah," Will said awkwardly, not sure what kind of ice he was treading on, and a little thrown. He remembered that Katz made the catgut connection; all Lecter did, up until he delivered Will to Budge's fucking doorstep, was expound a little, nothing too concrete. "He has an interest in that sort of thing."

"Lucky for you to date a guy with such varied interests," Jack said, and Will's breath caught.

It was one thing to have it hinted at, by Lecter's own behavior, to see some proof of it himself, or for people to assume a certain familiarity—but Jack was the first person who'd said it outright. He'd also used it as a dig. Will felt dizzy, but he tried to think of something to say, something he'd use if he were dating someone else and Jack questioned their involvement. *He wouldn't be too happy if I dated Alana, either. But maybe there'd be a little less eyebrow-raising.* "Are you mad that he's been *helpful*?" Will asked, sounding appropriately exasperated.

"I'm not mad at all," Jack said, pushing away from the table and making for the exit. "We'll make a push on those interviews with music store owners." He paused at the door, and Will met his gaze by accident. "That's all for now. Go home."

"'Goodnight, Will,'" he muttered to himself, but he collected his stuff and left the body to the empty room.

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It was eight before he got on the road again, and he found his hands shook on the steering wheel. *You have to eat, Graham*, the same little mocking tone in his own head that Chilton employed when Will refused a meal three times in one day, *you don't get to die so easily.* He ripped open a granola bar wrapper with his teeth, chewing so slowly it lasted him almost the entire ride home.

He sent the dogs outside again to let them stretch their legs before bed, whistling sharply when they started to prowl beyond the visibility of his porch light. Sometimes he brought a flashlight and went with them into the dark fields, their ears pushed forward, excited with the sounds of night life, but Will was too tired and too distracted to do more than sit on the porch and think.

He thought about Tobias Budge, about how it would feel to arrest him instead of leaving him to die on Lecter's office floor. About how it would feel to save those officers instead of

running out into the street and abandoning them to their deaths because his mind was betraying him. Will thought about it as he topped off the dog's food bowls for the night, took a shower, pulled on his sleep clothes, and turned off the lights to leave the house quiet and dark.

Will thought about how many other cases were potentially left unsolved if Lecter didn't have his sticky hands all over them. How many mistakes he could potentially unmake. Abigail. Georgia Madchen. Maybe even Gideon. He already knew Marissa Schurr was still alive. It was a world-shifting change to add names to a list of survivors instead of victims.

He lay on his side, his pillow smushed under his cheek, and watched the dogs settle in on the living room floor with bleary eyes. The dream he was in, it wasn't a bad gig, not really. Even if it had creepiness of his own subconscious pairing him with Lecter, which he had to admit actually made a lot of sense. His mind recoiled from the depth of Lecter's betrayal, and in an attempt to process the enormity of it, created somewhere new that both soothed him, gave him security, and emphasized how much it had gutted him at the same time. *What's the worst this Lecter can do to me?* Will thought around a yawn. Every betrayal was petty compared to the one he'd experienced.

Will shut his eyes. If he woke up the next morning and saw Chilton's face, at least he'd know he was more or less sane. Sane, but still hopelessly ensnared in a reality where there was no hope of absolving his sins. At least his own mind gave him a chance to try. And it gave him the dogs.

Chapter End Notes

Ten bucks says we know which reality he wakes up in. Still to come: those session recordings, Tobias Budge, another realization, and Will trying to empath his way around dinner (and a kiss) with Hannibal Lecter. Thanks to everyone who's read, left kudos, or commented!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will remembered where he was in the middle of brushing his teeth. His toothbrush nearly slid to the back of his throat, and he hunched over his sink, spitting and gagging for a few moments. When he came back up, he wiped paste from the corner of his mouth and some specks of it from the mirror before he observed his own watering eyes.

He'd woken up in his own bed. Margaret had whined at his bedside and thumped her tail at him. Will had blinked at her, slowly moved his hand over the edge of his bed, and brushed her velvet ears with the tips of his fingers until she calmed. Winston had lain just beyond her in one of the patches of sunlight streaking across the hardwood, the ends of his mottled fur lit a burnished gold. The stillness of the morning was so real that he forgot it wasn't.

The dreams he'd had the night previous were still present in his waking mind, or fragments of them, and Will contemplated them along with his own face as he brushed. He'd placed it, the nagging sense of unease, *this isn't real*, while finishing up with the left side of his mouth. Will continued to brush. His sleepy face stared back at him in the mirror, as tangible as anything, mouth an open grimace to make room for his working toothbrush. Hair limp and matted on one side from the pillow. Skin sallow, face too bristled with stubble. Elbow a sharp point as his arm moved.

Outside of the bathroom, one of the dogs yipped a protest at another.

This isn't real. I'm insane.

He was still bent over the sink and swishing cupped handfuls of tap water around in his mouth to dissipate the taste of shock and Colgate when he heard his landline ring. Most the dogs followed him at a well-trained distance, not underfoot but convinced there would be food or a morning walk, as Will padded through the house to find the handset.

It was Jack. "Morning," Will said, voice gruff.

"Up and at 'em. We got a hit on your Maestro profile, a music shop owner in Baltimore," Jack said, speaking loudly over the sounds of trainees who were running past and shouting cadence as they went. He was walking from his office to the parking lot, Will knew; he thrummed with far too much anticipation for it to have been the other way around. "Tobias Budge. I can send you the details, but I think it's worth going for this guy. He's got a juvenile record for trespassing and larceny. Single. Well-to-do, runs in elite circles, black, early forties. Everything you told us fits, including the basement and the fact that he makes his own catgut strings." Jack's voice gained an increasingly satisfied quality as he listed off each bingo; he'd caught the scent. "He's the only guy in all of Baltimore who does."

Will gripped the phone, his own tight feeling of satisfaction building in his chest over every

domino falling precisely the way he'd wanted it to. There was still anxiety, of course—they hadn't yet arrested Budge, and so much could go wrong during the process. Will paced himself. "Is the profile enough to bring him in?"

"Maybe. I'm still waiting for the word from on high. We can't directly tie him to anything, so all we're going off of right now is your profile. You know how it is."

"If he sees any agents or any cops, he's not going down without a fight," Will warned. He fought to keep himself from sinking into the memory of taut wire, the deafened ringing of a blown-out eardrum, and two cops' funerals Jack had told him he was better off not attending. "You need to bring a team along on this to make sure he doesn't take anyone out."

"Yeah, you told me. It's why we're still waiting. If he isn't our guy, Baltimore P.D. is going to spend months bitching about wasting resources on a bum FBI lead."

Will exhaled audibly, nudging Thelonious with his bare foot so he'd stop both shadowing Winston and crowding Will against his dining room wall. "If he *is* our guy, they get half the credit for catching the Maestro. Do I get to ride along?"

"If you get your ass to Baltimore ASAP, yeah. I don't know when we're going to get the all-clear to go after Budge. It could be in five minutes." The sounds of Jack hurrying to his car, the beep from his unlocking it, came over the line. "I'm leaving now so we'll be ready to go when we get the call."

"I'll drive fast," Will promised.

"Call Dr. Bloom and have her cover your classes," Jack instructed, and Will suspected there was something more behind the order more than a reminder to cover his bases, but Will didn't care enough to find out.

"Fine," he said, though he had no idea he'd been scheduled to teach that day. Not that it mattered. "Consider me on my way."

He called Alana in the car, too wound up to feel entirely guilty over monopolizing her time. Will found her kind, unfettered voice soothing. It was nice not to hear the veneer of detachment she'd employed of late to conceal how badly her throat wanted to close with tears.

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Will was right. Tobias Budge did not go down without trying to make a last stand. He lashed out as soon as Jack approached him, under a guise—for both Budge and the official paperwork—of routine investigation. He wasn't the type for guns, though, and the swarming army of Kevlar'd-up feds and local police was too much for one man, no matter how determined or skilled.

Jack had refused to let Will do more than hang back, nearly with the snipers, and Will argued with him outside of the Baltimore police station as everyone geared up before heading out.

Jack didn't give an inch of ground. "You've been saying you're a teacher with a badge," he'd said, rebuttoning his topcoat after going through the uncomfortable-looking process of strapping a vest over his middle. It didn't quite come together correctly after the addition, a fact Will was sure Budge would not miss. "I'm treating you like one."

"I was also a *cop*," Will had said, but Jack hadn't deigned to respond, turning instead to yell at everyone assembled to make sure they had the right game plan and were ready to move.

Budge was pissed they'd taken him alive and without much incident. Will saw the abject fury on his face, shaping its handsome angles into something ugly and snarling, though most of those present would have described his expression "stony." Maybe "aloof." Budge's facade was well constructed, but Will easily saw the cracks in its brittleness.

"You were right about the basement," Jack said, adrenalin and the thrill of capture leaving him short of breath. "Forensics are gonna have a field day in there."

He passed by Will and a variety of law enforcement milling around to find Katz, Price, and Zeller, who were standing by a conspicuously unmarked van and drinking coffee. They were all suited up and ready to work, Katz's goggles pushed to the front of her hair like a headband, and she was showing Zeller something on her phone. She'd waved at Will from across the street when everyone pulled up to the Baltimore station, and Will had found it remarkably easy to wave back.

Will turned his attention back to Budge. He was positioned to lean stomach-first against a squad car, handcuffed, and he had a strong feeling that Tobias Budge's headlines would be partnered with the image of him trussed up like a common criminal. He'd hate it. Will tamped down on a tiny smile that threatened to curl the corners of his lips.

Eventually they put him inside of the car, a cop's hand resting on top of his head to guide him that Budge bore with stiff-backed, bitter grace. But before he could close the door, Budge started talking. The cop leaned over, and Will tensed; it could have been a trap, a last fuck-you to the incompetent fools who'd taken him down to give one of them a lasting injury or worse, but nothing happened. The cop straightened, closed the door, and made his way over to Jack. He spoke quickly and spread his hands at his sides in a small sign of helplessness and surrender; he was out of his element.

And Jack looked positively murderous over whatever it is, then shook his head.

When he came over, Will already knew.

"He wants to talk to me, doesn't he?"

Jack's lips thinned further. "Yeah. Any idea why?"

"No," Will said, distracted by the distant silhouette of Budge's profile he could see in the car. Waiting. "Not really. But after Lounds' articles, I am kind of the unfortunate poster boy for the BAU."

Jack waved him off. "Go see what he wants. *Quickly*, before he changes his mind and asks for a lawyer."

Will had to get one of the cops to roll down Budge's window for him, and that took a minute. Standing a few feet away, Will studied the dormant lights on top of the squad car, a dead bug on the white roof, until Budge's window was rolled down and he couldn't put off stepping closer. The whites of Budge's eyes caught him unawares; he'd incorrectly guessed how far he'd need to look down.

"Will Graham," Budge said with weight. "I'm sorry to say that I'd underestimated you. I thought it would take you a lot longer."

"You weren't that hard to catch," Will said, just because he could. It didn't matter for two reasons; it wasn't real, and Will had finally found a way to reach catharsis with regards to Budge's end. His flippancy cost him nothing.

Budge made a noise that might have been the beginnings of a chuckle. "On the contrary. Without your … insight, the FBI would have been sniffing at dead trails for months. Maybe years. I wanted to congratulate you." His genial tone, shot through with calculation Will could clearly hear, turned abruptly demanding. "How did you do it?"

Will shrugged, slipping his hands deep into his pockets. "You weren't that good. Dramatics always get people like you caught; passion makes you sloppy. And," he huffed a chuckle free of humor, "peacocking for another serial killer was about as sloppy as you could get."

Instead of taking that with further fury or with more of his particular brand of nonchalance, Budge's eyebrows creased in the middle. He had, Will realized, no idea what to make of the words that had just come out of Will's mouth.

He didn't peacock for another other serial killer, Will thought, although it was as if the words were coming from outside of his body. *Because whoever it is doesn't exist here.*

Blood roared in Will's ears like the furious call of a feathered stag. Budge spoke, but Will didn't hear it at first, still internally reeling. Then, right before Will turned around and walked away on unsteady legs, he suggested Will visit him in prison. "Our conversation isn't over, Mr. Graham."

Jack gave him a searching once-over as he walked back, still looking like he'd been sucking on a penny. Will only shook his head. He grappled for the door handle of the unmarked car they'd driven him over from the station in, and he got himself inside and shut the door before it could all hit him at once.

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There had been no mention of Will's suspicions in the Maestro's work-up. No note that Special Agent Graham had postulated that his motive in killing Douglas Wilson might have been calling for another killer's—possibly the Ripper's, Will remembered suggesting with acute clarity—attention.

Because that killer—the Chesapeake Ripper—doesn't exist. Will played the words over and over in his head as though he might study them from different angles. He'd driven to Quantico from Baltimore to check the records himself; there was nothing. Nothing about his own theories as to the identity of the person Budge was appealing to, and absolutely nothing in the directory that used to hold the case file for the Chesapeake Ripper. He did a Google search and found nothing. He went to Tattle Crime and found the same thing.

Will was capable of solving a simple equation even when rattled and dreaming himself new realities. Hannibal Lecter was not the copy-cat killer here, and the Chesapeake Ripper did not exist here either. *Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper*.

The real question was whether his mind had engineered a scenario in order to help him accept a truth, or if it had invented something entirely. It took Will only a few moments to contemplate that; the heightened drama, the presentation—all of the copy-cat's flourishes matched the Ripper's M.O. perfectly. He'd adapted his signature to hide his identity, something Will found himself nearly impressed by, and that was why Will allowed himself to think himself blind to him—until he couldn't anymore.

I knew he was the Ripper. Will stared numbly at a computer screen, sequestered away in a corner of the BAU building, an uneaten turkey sandwich next to the keyboard. It was ostensibly his lunch break. He'd bought the sandwich because it was the least disgusting thing available, but he couldn't choke it down.

Lecter called him then, because that was the sort of subconscious Will had.

It was the worst possible moment. Will was ill equipped, staggered, and light-headed from not having eaten. His brain felt like it was sparking and smoking its way to an emergency shutdown. But there was something in him, something fascinated, and he was the one making Lecter's name appear on the caller ID in the first place. No one else.

Lecter would have been able to hear Will's state in his voice, but Will was lucky—he was a mess in any relationship, navigated them poorly, and so all he had to do was pretend that Lecter was one of his very limited attempts at being in one. Erratic behavior was par for the course, and anyone enmeshed enough to ask Will Graham on more than one date knew that well. Will picked up the phone, swallowing quickly. "Hey."

"Good afternoon, Will."

Will faltered entirely when he realized that he had nothing appropriate to say next or any idea what to call Lecter in return. More than that, the lack of a reaction to Lecter's voice made Will realize he ought to have been more uneasy, more disturbed. That was part of the struggle Will had in the hospital, too, reconciling Lecter's nearly perfect facade with Will's knowledge of his monstrousness, and how the facade had adjusted itself a little but never disappeared. He attempted to counsel Will even as he manipulated Will's so-called treatment under Chilton, tried keep him submerged under an ocean of drugs, methodically poisoned every relationship Will had managed to cultivate.

For all Will knew, Lecter's machinations were the reason he was dreaming up false realities in the first place. But for all of that, his calm, soothing tones were deeply familiar, and they had an association that was not entirely unpleasant. *You knew the whole time, Graham. You didn't want to see it, so you pushed it away.*

"Will?"

Fuck. Will pushed the sandwich away until he couldn't see or smell it anymore. *I can't do this.*

"Will?" Lecter's tone shifted quickly into concern. "Are you there?"

Christ, I can't even fake it for thirty seconds. Will squeezed his eyes shut.

The gold pendulum swung against the black of his shut lids, left, then right, and then left again. It happened so simply, like it had been waiting for Will to close his eyes.

My name is Will Graham. I'm awake. I'm at Quantico after having assisted in the capture of the Maestro.

"Will?"

I'm dating Hannibal Lecter. I have been for the past several months. At least. We are familiar to each other. I would expect a call the next day after missing an appointment with my psychiatrist, Dr. Du Maurier.

I have nothing to hide.

Will's eyes popped open. "Sorry," he said, adjusting his position in the uncomfortable office chair. "Technology sometimes gets the better of me."

Hannibal couldn't have completely bought it, but Will must have sounded good enough to pass muster. "Are you at the Academy?" he asked. "Dr. Bloom informed me she was to cover your classes again today."

"Did you call just to check up on me?" Will asked, gently mocking.

Will leaned back in his chair and quietly laughed when Hannibal said, "Of course," in much the same tone.

"I'm fine. We caught the Maestro; Jack called this morning and said someone fit my profile. Tobias Budge."

"Tobias Budge," Hannibal repeated with a considering little noise. "Not the man we encountered at the opera?"

Will did not let himself be thrown. He closed his eyes again, remembered the photo he'd found. *Hannibal's hand was at my back, keeping me steady in front of the flash of expensive*

digital cameras. I downed champagne without even tasting it to stop the shaking in my hands. I barely heard the music, and Hannibal noticed—of course he noticed. He offered to take me home during the intermission. But I turned him down and posed for the photograph, because I wanted to show that I wanted to be there. With him.

Tobias Budge introduced himself after the photographer moved on. He knew who I was. And I noticed him staring at me when I saw the picture on the internet. None of this is new to me.

"Yeah, it was him. I think I was on his radar for a while."

"It's a relief that he's in custody, then. You're certain he's the Maestro?"

"Completely," Will said. "His basement was filled with human remains he'd used in order to fashion himself gut string." Will made a noise of morbid approval. "He's a real stickler for authenticity."

Will heard Hannibal adjusting something on his desk. It was his lunch hour too, his time to unpack carefully prepared containers of food and eat them while he listened to ... Brahms, Will determined. *The Piano Concert No. 2*, if his ears did not deceive him. It filtered through like a distant wind chime. "I'm glad you're all right. Are you going to resume your regular teaching duties tomorrow, now that the Maestro's been captured?"

He cautioned against my work in the field when he was my therapist. I returned to teaching primarily, but Jack still wheedles me into working on the big cases. It's a point of contention between them. And us, on occasion. "Yeah. Alana won't have to play substitute teacher anymore." Will closed the tab on the screen he was still staring at, opened up a new one. "Remind me to send her flowers for that."

"We can do better than that," Hannibal announced. "I'll invite her to dinner. And I'd offer her beer if you hadn't already polished off most of the reserve," he finished, mildly amused.

"I'll buy her flowers and beer and we'll invite her to dinner," Will said. "Is that enough?"

"Most likely. Dr. Bloom is extremely gracious."

"That she is."

"Speaking of dinner companions," Hannibal said, his segue delivered as smoothly as a jazz progression, "are you able to join me tonight?"

His fingers halted in the middle of searching for a local florist shop. *This is normal*, he reminded himself. *I'll accept, because I have no reason not to. I even enjoy the invitation.* "Yeah, of course," he said, betraying nothing of the dissonance in his head.

"Will you be staying the night?" he asked, still calm and casual but with a hint of suggestiveness Will found himself flushing over. *Every time he asks, I'm taken aback. He'll expect this; I'm always too direct or too halting.*

Will tapped the desk with his fingers, seemingly thinking about it. "Not tonight, no. I think my dogs are getting separation anxiety."

"Of course," Hannibal said, and then, "Do you have any requests?"

"No," Will said. "You always knock it out of the park. Any suggestion of mine would be a joke." *I'd be eager to eat his food.*

"You flatter me and discredit yourself," he said, "but thank you. I'll see you around seven-thirty?"

Will glanced at the time. "I'll try to make it by eight. I've still got work to finish up with, Jack's going to send me to paperwork purgatory with the Maestro collar, and I need to update my syllabus. I have no idea where I'm at since Alana had to step in."

"I'll let you get back to it. I look forward to sharing dinner with you tonight, Will."

"Me too," Will said, the soft smile that grew on his face helping his voice to match Hannibal's level of fondness.

They hung up, and it took a few moments for the smile to fade, for the faint grooves of exhaustion to appear beside Will's lips again, for him to completely return to himself. He hadn't quite disappeared into—*himself*, into the other Will Graham that he'd designed, but he'd gone somewhere else. He'd had to. Otherwise he would have spent the whole conversation shaking and stuttering.

A dinner date at Lecter's home was going to require a much firmer hold on the other Will Graham persona. If he was going to keep Lecter's food down, let alone pass as a convincing significant other, he couldn't afford to slip.

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Jack gave Will even more paperwork than he'd anticipated, and he spent most of the rest of the afternoon working through it. Once it was done and passed off, he'd started to review his curriculum, and it was surprisingly unfamiliar to him. He worked until the alarm on his phone reminding him to get on the road sounded, a frustrating amount of cross-checks left undone. A lot of the material for his real lectures indirectly referenced the Ripper, or more recently the copy-cat. The ripple effects of Lecter's kills spread so far that Will still hadn't found all of them—or really the lack of them. He didn't want to open his mouth to tell a room filled with sharp-eyed, competitive trainees something about a killer they'd never heard of.

He made good time on the drive, got to Lecter's—*Hannibal's*, he reminded himself, trying to remember to keep them in two deliberately separate categories to avoid slipping—place a little bit early. Hands on the steering wheel, car still running and stereo pumping the end of a Creedence Clearwater Revival song, Will sat in the driveway and did his best to shuffle his emotions into some kind of order. The unreality of the situation, even the ludicrousness of it, made it a harder task. *What the fuck does it matter? I could make them watch Looney Tunes for an hour instead of actually teaching. I could treat Lecter like a stranger or confront him*

*over his murders, and none of it would change a thing. I'm **asleep**.*

Will killed the engine but continued to sit in the driveway for a while, listening to the engine tick as it cooled down. *He knows you're here*, he thought after a few long minutes of doing nothing. *This is ridiculous. It's dinner. You've eaten dinner with him before. You enjoyed it then, you can pretend to enjoy it now.*

Sighing, he opened the car door and stepped out. If he wasn't going to wake up anytime soon, he had to conceivably make his way through that night's dinner and perhaps many dinners thereafter. He was doing a shit job of it so far, he knew that, and no amount of dragging his feet and feeling bowled over with inner turmoil was going to help him improve. He had to be convincing.

Get through tonight, he thought, pasting on a more neutral expression and raising his hand to knock on the front door until he remembered that he had a goddamn key. They weren't in the stage of a relationship where one knocked. The door was unlocked, though, and once it swung open, Will could hear sizzling and smell something cooking. His stomach twisted itself up, hungry and revolted at the same time.

He took off his coat and had hung it in its usual place on the stand when Hannibal came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a rag.

"You made good time," he remarked, everything about his gaze warm, even happy, as it traveled over Will. "I just started."

"I didn't finish my massive list, but my eyes were starting to cross." That actually gave him an idea, and Will found himself drawing up in preparation to poke after it. "Actually, can I use your computer? I need to finish something off, it won't take more than five or ten minutes," *and it will keep me from having to make awful small talk while you cook*, but Hannibal had already nodded.

"Of course. It's in the study, it should be on. The password is 'home0112358.'"

Will nodded, thankful his USB drive was still in his jacket pocket; it was only a matter of fishing it out and making his way to the study. There was a Mac desktop sitting atop a huge antique desk made of beautifully finished oak. He ignored the mountainous bookshelves and the art on the walls with single-minded focus. The computer quietly hummed, asleep but on, until he jostled the mouse. Will sat down and typed in the password, fitting his USB drive into a port.

It was a small chance and a stupid one. Will wasn't usually a particularly lucid dreamer, but as he clicked around, he found that he'd either supplied himself with exactly what he was looking for, or his estimation of Hannibal's habits was correct.

He'd found evidence that his sessions were recorded, but there was no sign of the corresponding tapes in the basement. He was betting that if Hannibal owned a tablet and, as Will had learned, an expensive computer, he surely would not have resorted to a crappy tape recorder in the first place.

He hadn't. When Will did a search for his own name, he found a list of mp3s in a subfolder called 'Graham, W,' each session date included in the file name. His hands didn't shake; his breath was not bated with nerves and anticipation. For one, if Hannibal came into the study, Will would have had ample time to conceal his snooping. And if not, what did it matter? *I could tell him I wanted to relive our relationship*, Will thought, watching the transfer as it neared completion. *Maybe he'd think it was* ***romantic****.*

Once the files were done, Will disconnected the drive and put it in his jean's pocket. He didn't know what he'd hoped to learn from listening to what were likely his own fabrications, but if he wasn't going to wake up very soon, he was going to need have to play another Will Graham note-perfectly. Empathizing was what he did; he wasn't so ludicrous as to dismiss doing it with himself. The files were a shortcut he'd readily utilize.

After poking around at Hannibal's unsurprisingly impersonal folders, he stood up and headed toward the kitchen.

Hannibal had on an apron, the white of it stark against his dark slacks and maroon shirt, rolled up to expose his arms. Will settled in at a stool to watch him cook, knowing it was what he'd do, and tried to see those arms the way another Will might have. It was difficult; Will didn't consider himself particularly *curious*, maybe a one-point-five on the Kinsey scale, and admitting that Hannibal was attractive, or at least interesting, was not enough to convince himself that it meant he was attractive specifically to Will. The admittedly significant pull he'd felt—laughably, in retrospect, what Will thought was *kinship* after a lifetime without it—had nothing to do with the way Hannibal filled out a suit.

For the first time, he found himself curious as to what had led the other Will Graham to date Hannibal Lecter. Not his own mind's rationalization, his nearly Freudian analysis, but curiosity as to what had happened between them that was so different and so transformative that Will had woken up in his bed. Hannibal flicked a pinch of something into the pan he was using and stirred. *What is it with you? Were we just equal amounts of lonely? Did you get tired of fucking widows and social climbers and decide to go for something a little more down-home?*

"Thanks again for letting me use your computer," Will said, cutting off the train of thought before he could really narrow in on the *fucking* part.

"It's not a problem," Hannibal said, and he gestured to the mug Will had noticed days before, idly steaming. "Decaf, if you're interested."

All right, Graham, now or never. He blinked a few times, restless and in a hurry, trying to tap into the Will Graham who would know how to handle this, who was charmed by it. It took a moment, but eventually he grasped something that he thought might work. "I am, but I'm still not quite done wrapping my head around the fact that you're making me decaf."

Hannibal smiled; Will saw his profile lift and crease with it. "The things we do," he agreed. "It tastes like chemicals and smells even worse."

"It smells delicious." Will grabbed the mug and inhaled; coffee was about the only thing his stomach would take without argument. He sipped when he'd ascertained it was cool enough.

"That you enjoy it is all I care about," Hannibal said, picking up a cutting board full of vegetables and urging them into the pan with the aid of his knife.

Will did not fixate on the knife. He sipped his coffee.

After some relatively comfortable silence, Will pulled in a deep but quiet breath, readying himself for the rest of the night. "So, what are we having?"

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"Dr. Bloom called again," Hannibal said, balancing part of an asparagus spear onto his fork without so much as a tremor in his wrist. "She says Abigail Hobbs is persistent about wanting to speak to the both of us." He raised the fork to his lips, halting it in mid-air before continuing, slightly more sardonically, "I imagine Ms. Lounds is pushing her for more material for her book."

Will chewed his own bite of asparagus, the ends lightly crisped and drizzled with some sort of fragrant oil. It still took him twenty deliberate chews before he could force it down his throat; no matter what revelation he'd made, it did not seem to have brought back his appetite. "Should we go visit her?"

Hannibal laid his utensils down on his plate with a soft tink, crossing his fork over his knife. He took a long sip of wine and regarded Will over the rim of his glass thoughtfully. "No. You know that I have long cautioned that we keep our distance from Ms. Hobbs, especially now that she has Freddie Lounds whispering in her ear."

That was definitely new. Every time Will had a second thought, had doubted his fierce resolution to keep Abigail company, to try and help her in any way he could, Lecter was there, all but tripping over himself to do the same in his own right. "She doesn't have anyone *but* Freddie Lounds."

"She has Alana Bloom. She has the support of the staff and her fellow patients. She does not need us to irritate a healing wound. Our interactions have only confused her."

Alana had made a similar argument when she thought Will was fixating on Abigail, trying to take the place of her dead father out of misplaced guilt. It had been easier to shoot her down, knowing that Lecter was on his side and that he'd actually been there; he'd been the one to keep Abigail's lifeblood from draining out onto the floor. It was harder, knowing what he knew in hindsight and coming up against Hannibal's steeled resolve and good sense, to argue the point. He pushed food across his plate and tried again. "You can't be excited about the prospect of the book, though. Maybe we can talk her out of it."

"I'm loath to deny Ms. Hobbs a potential livelihood, although I cannot deny that I do not welcome the scrutiny a book will put on our personal lives."

"And even if we cooperate, Lounds would turn it into something salacious to sell copies," Will mused, twirling pasta around his fork and cutting it with the edge to make for a neater bite. It was a paltry trick he'd learned at the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane; eat a few bites, push the rest around, hope the guard on duty didn't have the hawk-eye that Barney did for misdirection.

"Quite. There has been enough conjecture about our relationship; I have no desire to give Freddie Lounds any more fodder."

Will was a little surprised to find that he wasn't bridling at the notion of leaving Abigail to Freddie's devices. Even with what he knew of her, at least in reality—killing Nicholas Boyle, helping her father select the victims, playing total innocence with chilling, pitch-perfect skill—he still wanted to shield her from what he could, though apparently he didn't consider Freddie Lounds to have been on that list. And, most of all, he wanted to see her alive again. The last memory he had of Abigail Hobbs was vomiting a part of her into a sink. *She would have wanted every part to be honored, and we failed her.* It was a desolate thought that left him hunching over his plate, working his jaw.

Hannibal picked up his silverware and continued eating his meal, evidently not bothered by Will's detour into silence. Will raised his head and picked up his own knife and fork again. "So we leave it alone," he surmised. "How many chapters can she write about the teacher and the psychiatrist who got together because of shared trauma anyway?" Will said, the darkness of his recent thoughts shading the words and turning them into only half of a joke.

Hannibal froze, and Will watched with sinking fascination as a frown appeared on his face, drawing the corners of his strange mouth down the slightest amount. I *missed that one by a mile*, he thought, at once scrambling to fix his error and reintegrating the knowledge into what he thought was his understanding of their dynamic. Every time he thought he had his bearings, he realized he was looking in the wrong direction.

"I suppose," he said, setting his napkin on the table beside his plate. He pushed back from the table, and Will gauged for a moment that he'd misstepped so much that he'd offended him, but Hannibal only stood and retrieved his bottle of wine from a sideboard. If the wound smarted, he concealed that fact perfectly. He made as if to come around to Will's side of the table, but Will waved him off for the second time. He'd get drunk in two sips, and he needed a clear head, no matter how much he wanted some of the weight to be chemically lifted from his shoulders.

"I have to admit to being curious about the book," Will said as Hannibal refilled his own glass, his pouring so precise that the stream remained constant and all but silent. "How she's going to spin it."

"I wager she'll be portrayed as a hapless victim of circumstance and narrowly as a survivor, which she is. Lounds is not a stupid woman. She will gild the lily to appropriate effect."

"She's going to have to," Will said, keeping a sharp eye on his face. "It'll take a lot of gilding to cover up how she helped her father. There are a lot of holes."

Lecter's eyebrows rose. He sat back in his chair, both wrists braced on the table, and made no move to touch his food again. Will had gotten his blood up. "So you are no longer convinced of Abigail Hobb's innocence?" he asked, sounding only intrigued.

Either Abigail Hobbs never went to Hannibal with her truth, which seemed to be the case, or Will had never had cause to put the pieces together. Without Nicholas Boyle's dead body complicating matters, it was harder to see how things aligned. Will leaned forward, trying to tap into a Will Graham who did not agree with Hannibal Lecter on the subject of Abigail Hobbs. It was surely a regular topic of conversation between them. "And you are? You tried to tell me she'd helped her father." He took a gamble he thought was pretty sound. "You didn't exactly attempt to disabuse Jack of the notion, either."

He got lucky when the response wasn't a flat-out denial or utter confusion. Hannibal chuckled, lifting his full glass of wine. He seemed to savor his sip as much as the moment. Will wondered if their dinner conversations were always so heavy. "Don't put words in my mouth, Will," he said without any heat. "I said it was plausible that she helped her father. You were the only one with a vehement opinion on the subject."

Will managed a huff of irritation instead of the outright rude snort he wanted to make. "Well, I'm finally agreeing with you that it's plausible, I guess. Very plausible."

"What changed your mind?"

Will glanced down at his silverware and resisted the urge to fiddle with it. His table manners weren't going to impress anyone, but he could save himself from making at least the most obvious blunders. "I had a dream about it," he said awkwardly, opting for honesty. "I was Abigail, and I saw myself—" he shook himself out of the memory long enough to not let the words 'Nicholas Boyle' slip from his mouth, "—*helping*. It doesn't matter. What matters is that Jack was right. Hobbs would never have been able to work on his own without raising suspicion."

"I am glad that your feelings about Abigail Hobbs are not impeding your skills," he said, gentler than he had been.

Will smiled ruefully. "Oh, but the feelings are definitely still there. I just work around them."

"As everyone does, Will." Hannibal turned a half-smile on him. "And I thought we'd agreed that discussing our work over dinner was tawdry?"

"What can I say? I'm just a very tawdry person."

"Hardly. But, if you're finished, I think I'm going to clear the table and change the subject all the same." He smiled again as he rose, the meandering into verboten topics forgiven, and balanced his plate in the crook of his elbow before coming around for Will's. When he collected it, he leaned in so closely that his thigh pressed against Will's chair, the pleasant spice of him filling Will's nose. It was so calculated that Will almost laughed into his water goblet.

Hannibal stepped away, and Will raised his voice so his question would carry into the kitchen. "What's for dessert?"

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Will begged off a nightcap and cast a few glances to his watch. He didn't have to push much or stumble through an announcement; Hannibal himself declared it was time for Will to leave if he wanted adequate sleep that night, seeing him out of the sitting room and toward the door.

His company was not unpleasant. Despite the trouble he had forgiving himself for that fact, Will rarely felt like he was teetering on the edge of his persona—though after his mediocre attempt at eating full portions at dinner and taking two nibbling bites of dessert, Hannibal did level him with an appraising look and ask after his appetite.

"I'm exhausted," Will had admitted. "All the adrenalin of catching Budge disappeared, and I feel depleted." It was true, too. "I get like this, it's like I have the flu and my appetite goes away. I'll be fine." He'd taken a chance and let himself flick his gaze up, toward Hannibal's eyes, pairing the effort with a small smile. "It's not a comment on the food or the company, I promise."

Standing awkwardly in the foyer near the coat stand, Will wasn't certain how to proceed, and no amount of coaching himself into empathizing with another Will Graham yielded a solution. He sort of hovered where he was, not grabbing his coat, first with his hands in his pockets, then out of them, useless at his sides and fingers longing to twitch.

He knew it was a pretty likely possibility that they'd kiss goodnight, and he started preparing himself for it practically the minute dinner ended, stomping down on his lingering queasiness over the idea. He still found himself staring as Hannibal bridged the distance between them, though, easily and with a private smile.

This isn't a time to fixate on his dental work, Will Graham, he told himself, panicking a little, and only exhaled slowly instead of startling when Hannibal put his hands above Will's waist, bracketing him in a secure hold.

It was warm and mostly dry, the only trace of wetness from Will's end because he'd just licked his lips. Will opened his mouth and breathed it in, aware of how Hannibal could feel his chest expanding under the tender cup of his hands; that made him respond well, like he was relieved. He pushed closer, the pressure a bit more insistent, and his fingers tightened on his sides so that Will's shirt started to bunch.

I've been terrible at pretending to be a boyfriend, he chided himself, taking in another deep breath through his nose deliberately so that Hannibal could assume it was a reaction to his soft and talented mouth.

That talent and the enjoyment he felt that Will picked up on, like warming himself near a fire, made it an enjoyable kiss. They parted, and Hannibal surprised him by touching their foreheads together for a brief, affectionate moment.

"You're too thin," he murmured after pulling away.

When his fingers deliberately squeezed, feeling for Will's ribs—which he knew were uncharacteristically prominent—he blurted out, "Water weight."

Hannibal pulled back, and Will could see he was affected by the kiss. It had softened him. He said nothing in response to Will's stupidity.

"And stress," Will amended, inwardly kicking himself, then doing it again when something else almost as ridiculous decided to spill out of his mouth. "I took a diuretic a few days ago."

"You need to take better care of yourself," Hannibal said, and he slid his hands a bit lower, close to the band of Will's trousers.

Will relaxed his tensing stomach muscles. "That's what I have you for," he tried to joke. "And Dr. Du Maurier," but Hannibal's attention was trained on Will's mouth, not the chatter coming out of it.

Hannibal kissed him again, and that time Will met it, craning his neck to offset the force. The second kiss was much slicker and hotter than the first; some part of Will revised his assessment of Hannibal's mouth from *talented* to *expert*. The edges of his teeth scraped at Will's lip until he opened his mouth wider, and it was the only ounce of clumsiness he showed. He felt Hannibal move one of his hands to Will's face, a long thumb stroking his jaw. It slipped very near to a sensitive spot; the shudder when Hannibal swept his thumb directly on top of the spot in the next second was involuntary, but also because it was an effective trick, something Hannibal must have learned through experience.

They pulled apart, Hannibal dropping both of his hands from Will's body, and Will found his breathing had increased its pace, his eyes blinking rapidly. He wasn't sure what he was reacting to; pleasure, or his internal discomfort with its source. He pushed it away to agonize over it later.

"Are you sure you can't stay the night? It's a long drive back to Virginia." He searched Will's face, and Will was fascinated by the tiny reddened patch of beard-burn under his lip in return.

"Crossing state lines three times in one day does test my limits," Will said, wry and quiet, "but yeah," he went for regret and landed it, "I'm sure."

Hannibal did not seem surprised, but he did seem a little disappointed. His attention flitted to Will's lips again, and he hummed before taking a step back. "Drive safely and sleep well." He picked Will's coat from the stand and handed it to him, back to being a model host. As Will put it on he said, "Eat protein in the morning. You will not last through a block of lectures on coffee alone."

Yes, dad, Will did not say. Neither of them would have appreciated it. And it wasn't like Will's father ever had to nag him to eat.

Instead of an agreement, he gave Hannibal a tremulous smile, dragged up from somewhere still reeling from the effect of a kind touch. "You sleep well too."

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He ended the night sitting cross-legged in bed with Winston's sleepy head braced on his thigh. Will used one hand to scratch the fur on his neck and the other to navigate his laptop. The files were loaded, ready to be listened to, but Will found himself reticent to click. A tumbler of whiskey was on his nightstand; he reached for it and shifted the ice in the glass when he took a drink. Winston whined once he realized Will had stopped petting him.

One of the other dogs jumped onto the bed, but Will was too distracted to notice which one. "Fucking seriously," he muttered, stabbing at the touchpad with his thumb. He leaned back as the file loaded, cradling the tumbler on his chest.

"Will that be able to pick me up if I'm up here?" Will heard himself ask, and the sound was a little muted.

"It should, so long as you speak clearly." Lecter's voice was firmer, nearer to whatever he'd used to record the sessions.

Will shut his eyes, shutting out the laptop screen and the dogs and even the cold weight of the drink on his chest. He remembered their first official session, standing on the second level of Lecter's office, pouring over Lecter's shelves of books and notes but never really paying attention to them. Hobbs had rattled him. He hadn't slept well the night before.

There was a sound of rustling. The bed disappeared from underneath him. He was standing in Lecter's office. The wall of books was before him. His tired eyes stayed on them.

"Is Jack really going to listen to these?"

"Perhaps. It's certainly an option."

Will snorted. "An option Jack specifically asked for, though, right?"

"We aren't here to worry about Jack Crawford, Will. He's merely the agent of our meeting. I do not answer to Jack Crawford, and I will not be running to him with reports, if that is your worry."

He paced; his footfalls were not picked up by the recording device, but Will knew he paced, could see his brown shoes looking very out of place on the plush carpet. "It doesn't matter to me. He's the one who wants me in therapy after the Hobbs thing, so I'm in therapy. Both of us do our jobs, you get paid, I get back to work."

"That is I suppose a clinical and efficient way of looking at our arrangement. God forbid we become friendly."

"I don't find you that interesting."

"I do." Lecter's voice lilted with it, with sincerity. "I find you very interesting. Both your unique abilities and the personality behind them. I'm sorry to hear that you don't feel the same."

Will was silent for a long moment, probably touching the spine of one of the books, not caring if it was impolite to do so without asking. Lecter would not have put his books on a precariously reached second level if he wanted people to handle them, after all. "Isn't it a conflict of interest?"

"Which? My finding you interesting or our unfortunate involvement in the Hobbs case?"

Will wasn't amused. "The second."

"We are talking to each other in an unofficial capacity. If you decide that there is a conflict of interest, I will refer you to one of my colleagues. But I don't think we will have any problems. The situation is an opportunity, not a hindrance."

"What if Jack decides it's a conflict of interest?"

"Are you really so worried about Jack Crawford right now, Will?"

Silence. Will made it back to the ladder-end of the mezzanine and slid his hands into his pockets. No, Jack was an irritant, but he wasn't a puppet master; Will didn't dance according to his whims. He heard rustling again, the sound of paper on paper, and turned to look. Lecter held what looked like a letter, and when he saw that Will was paying attention, he stepped closer. The recorder did pick up his heavier and nearer footfalls, each deliberate and crisp.

"What's that?" Will asked.

"Your psychological evaluation. You're totally functional and more or less fit for field work." He placed it on the empty chair Will was meant to sit on with a dryly amused expression. "Well done."

"Did you just rubber-stamp me?"

Will remembered that his incredulity made him too curious to avoid eye contact; it was some of the first they'd shared, and Will did not wince from it. Neither did Lecter give him the chance to. He tilted his face to better look at Will across the distance.

"Yes. Jack Crawford may lay his weary head to rest knowing that you weren't compromised by killing Hobbs, and our conversations can continue without your fixation on his involvement." A pause. "If I give him this letter, I will not pass along any of the recordings. Does this sound satisfactory?"

Will strode across the mezzanine again, thinking. Recalibrating what he knew of Dr. Lecter, which wasn't much; he hadn't cared to look deeply. He'd thought he was a dandy, one who shirked the pace of whatever career he'd had before psychiatry—surgeon, by the looks of his

hands and his steady demeanor—and who had been delighted to sink his teeth into a marvel like Will, professionally speaking. Their experience at the Hobbs house meant nothing to Will; he felt alone in it, and he'd spent the many hours by Abigail's bedside alone but for the rotating hospital staff. Lecter had sent flowers; Will watched what life was stored in their clipped stems begin to leave them after the first day.

By the book. Wealthy, using the trappings of it to disguise his own inadequacies. Decently intelligent – Will knew he'd published some notable articles. His clientele was comprised of neurotics and pill-seekers, people wealthy and self-obsessed enough to pay his rates. All of it meant he was willing to follow the FBI around if it meant a few anecdotes for a dinner party and a little spark of danger in an increasingly sedate, plaid-filled existence.

Will was wrong, he realized. He'd mistaken his glance into Lecter's surface as the whole picture. "Jack thinks I need therapy."

"You might. You just experienced a major traumatic event. Isn't therapy mandatory after someone has taken a life in the line of duty?"

"Technically, I'm a teacher. I advise. And I'm a Special Agent, not a cop."

"But you were a cop. Did you never take a life?"

Will scrubbed a hand across his jaw. "No. Until Hobbs, I'd never been able to pull the trigger."

"Regardless of protocol or Jack Crawford's curiosity, you will need to discover ways to bring yourself out of dark places when sent there."

Not sure if he was agreeing, Will said, "Last time he sent me to a dark place, I brought something back."

Lecter broke their eye contact, turning away when he noticed Will was starting to bridle under his direct attention. Another point in the column of Will's underestimation. "A surrogate daughter?" Will startled at that, speechless. He'd meant the specter of Hobbs, but if Lecter wanted to go down that path … "You saved Abigail Hobbs' life; you also orphaned her. It comes with certain emotional obligations regardless of empathy disorders."

"You were there, you saved her life too, do you feel obligated?"

Lecter glanced up from his busywork and met Will's gaze again. "Yes," he said. "I feel a staggering amount of obligation. I feel responsibility. I found myself searching for ways to negate the damage done to Abigail Hobbs."

Their gazes continued to hold, and Will felt a distinct shudder crawling up his spine over having his own thoughts come from someone else's mouth. Will started to nod, but Hannibal continued. "I even considered treating her myself. None of this is her concern."

Will's moment of connection withered and disappeared, leaving him feeling sour. "Is that your

way of trying to tell me something?"

"Not at all. If I wish to tell you something, I will not hide behind analogies." He turned his attention back to his desk; perhaps he was actually a fidgeter by nature and it wasn't for show, but Will doubted it. They were both circling, sniffing at each other like unfamiliar dogs. "If you feel comfortable enough to manage it, I would have you come down from there, Will."

Will scowled, but he made to descend the ladder. When he stepped off the final rung, he turned and faced Lecter expectantly.

He was still standing by his desk, and he studied Will with an expression softer than Will would have expected. "We must be honest with each other here if these conversations are going to be worth your time. Your attempts to disengage have their uses, but they are outside of these walls. And I hope in time I can teach you better methods."

"You aren't the first psychiatrist I've seen."

Lecter inclined his head. "No, I didn't think so. But I was there for your encounter with Garret Jacob Hobbs, I understand your obligation to his daughter, and I do not think the mirrors in your mind are there only to reflect only the worst of someone else. They have the ability to reflect the best of you."

Will pressed stop, dislodging a dog from comfortable sleep as he moved. He closed the laptop entirely, sitting in the new silence in a sort of daze. The session lingered with him like he'd emerged from a pool with water stopping his ears, limbs heavy when out of a buoyant state. In the dark, he stared at the ceiling and replayed Lecter's words in his head, fascinated by the veracity in his voice, the lack of guile.

He drifted off to sleep eventually after he polished off the rest of the whiskey, watered down by melted ice. When he woke the next morning, sickened from just a little booze on a mostly-empty stomach, the empty glass was still there on his nightstand, and the laptop still on his bed.

Dreams don't last this long, he thought, staggering into the bathroom with his arms out to keep him from crashing against the doorframe. Will avoided his face in the mirror. *I don't know where I am, but I don't think I'm asleep.*

Chapter End Notes

Big revelations! Will being freaked out! Kissing! Next chapter: Will doubts his perception and sanity (this seems to be a recurring theme in Will Graham's unfortunate life), there's more Lecter interaction, and a bunch more of those session recordings I kept making a big deal out of for reasons. Plus other stuff probably happens.

Yeah, you may have noticed I included a take on a canon conversation from episode one that definitely didn't happen during their first official session, but this Lecter would *never* have visited Will and brought him people scramble. So things are a bit amalgamated. (And there will be more canon-with-a-twist throughout, because Lecter's got a slightly different tack when he's not trying to manipulate Will six ways from Sunday.)

And no, I'm not doing every single session, because 1) that is a lot D:, and 2) there's only so much flashback people are interested in reading? Especially flashback that heavily revisits canon.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'd offer you a cup, but, well …" Will lifted his own Styrofoam cup of cheap black coffee, burning his hand with its heat. He let its inferiority go unstated.

Tobias Budge only stared at him.

Will took his seat. At the opposite end of the interview table, arms and legs cuffed, wearing a standard-issue orange jumpsuit that Will remembered not being able to breathe in without uncomfortable wrinkling and bunching, Budge did not have a hair out of place. The lines of the jumpsuit were clean and crisp.

The chain on his handcuffs jingled a little when he folded his hands. "It's been two days," Budge said.

Will sipped from his coffee. Too light a roast and too over-brewed for his taste at the same time, but he didn't drink for pleasure. *Feeling sleepy in a dream,* he thought, darkly amused. *Ten points to my brain for realism.* "My job usually doesn't involve jailhouse interviews," Will said.

Budge had been awfully uncooperative. He'd confessed, more or less, but he refused to so much as write out a statement or deal with a lawyer unless Special Agent Will Graham came back to Baltimore and spoke to Budge himself. An exasperated homicide detective provided Will with two felt-tipped pens and a yellow legal pad in case Budge finally decided to confess in writing for the record. They didn't strictly need a confession, not with the mountain of evidence found in the space under his shop, but it would help the prosecutor's office push back against any insanity plea the D.A. might try for.

He had no hope that Budge wanted to do anything other than size up Will's empathy, poke around his brain like the gears of a clock or the innards of one of his instruments, until he was completely satisfied that he had been caught by someone *worthy*. In Budge's mind, they were adversaries; Will guessed that without the Ripper, Budge needed someone to fixate on, someone who inherently understood his work. It wasn't the first time he'd been courted by a serial killer. Nearly all of them wanted recognition, and they wanted it from someone they deemed deserving.

"Your job." Budge faked amusement. "You teach bright-eyed up and comers at the FBI Academy, isn't that right? In between moonlighting as a profiler and writing monographs."

"I'm not a profiler; there's no such job description." Let a pedant like Budge get something stuck in his craw; Will was irritated over having to be there, so Budge could suffer the same. He'd had to cut his lecture block off early, and just as he was getting back into the swing of it; when he spotted Jack hanging in the doorway with a stormy expression, he knew he was

doomed to another errand neither of them wanted him on. "You're right, though; I teach, and occasionally I help the FBI catch people like you."

"Why don't you *analyze* full-time?" Budge asked conversationally.

"I prefer teaching. And we're not here to talk about me. That would get pretty boring fast." Will sipped more coffee and let it burn a path down his throat.

He'd done the whole song and dance of interrogation quite a bit back in New Orleans; he was good at it for the same reason he was good at working for the BAU. When it started to become evident that busting in doors with his gun drawn wasn't the best fit for Will, they'd basically restricted him to desk duty and brought him in for tricky interrogations. He'd racked up a lot of hours in cinder-block rooms. Still, it felt pretty far away from him right then, staring down a Tobias Budge who might or might not have been a figment of his own imagination. He had a lot on his plate, too much to care about a showy killer who was already behind bars.

"You're not boring at all." He leaned in the slightest amount. "You don't prefer teaching, it's just that Jack Crawford hasn't found a way to justify keeping you on a leash."

"I guess we're talking about me anyway," he muttered. "What can I tell you that will you get to stop jerking everyone around? Or do you really not care what gets said about you or where you end up?" Will cracked a smile. "Somehow I doubt that."

"Of course I don't care where I end up." The first flash of actual emotion sparked in him then; rage lit his eyes up. "I wasn't supposed to get caught, let alone caught alive." Budge shifted in his chair, a move that would have had Will looking uncomfortable, but on Budge it only seemed like the coiling of a snake. "Let's not mince words here, Mr. Graham. I want to know how you caught me."

"You already know how we caught you. Police work. It was pretty routine. But you don't like that answer, so here I am."

"Here you are," Budge repeated. "It seems strangely convenient, though, Mr. Graham, that it was you who caught me. Considering our history and connections."

"Not really that convenient," Will said, though something about Budge's tone was straightening his spine, giving him the old rush of alertness. "You knew who I was before we met at the opera, and it must have interested you, getting so close. The FBI asked me to do a profile on the Maestro, I did, and you happened to be the one killing people and making instruments out of them in your basement. I wouldn't really call that much of a connection."

"Ah, yes, our encounter at the opera. You didn't seem to be enjoying yourself."

"Black tie isn't my thing."

"Yes," Budge said with a smile. "That was evident. But when I spoke of connections, I was referring to your date, and the … uncomfortable way we were introduced."

Will did his best not to look blank. Listening to a handful of sessions and his best attempts at reconstructing what must have happened at the opera did not give him more than very broad strokes. "What about my date?" Will asked.

"If Franklyn hadn't been so eager to confront the good doctor, you might never have seen my face. Such an odd happenstance for me to befriend the man your Dr. Lecter had issues with. I think the jury might have a difficult time keeping it all straight, that's all."

Will remembered the two dead bodies on Lecter's office floor, the claim that Budge had come to murder Lecter's patient. That he was just caught in the cross-hairs of a madman's final stand – but given what Will knew about Lecter's actual identity, that explanation didn't hold water for a second. So Franklyn Froideveaux was the second dead body, back in Will's actual life, but Budge hadn't managed to kill him here. And they'd all met at the opera. How quaint. "My date treated yours, and all of a sudden that's a connection?" Will shook his head. "You're reaching, Budge."

Budge gracefully spread his fingers, his version of a shrug. "It's interesting to me, that's all. An interesting observation. The police had next to no leads in the Maestro investigation, but after we met, after Dr. Lecter and Franklyn went their separate ways, all of a sudden I'm in handcuffs."

Will studied him for a moment. He clearly wasn't denying the fact that he was a murderer; he didn't want to go to jail, but rarely did anyone, and he was furious over being caught, but none of it added up. He remained silent for a few moments too long, struggling to slot everything together. It wasn't until he remembered Budge's intense stare at his tuxedo-clad back in that society photo when he figured he might have solved it. "What, did you think that my meeting you for thirty seconds was some sort of *catalyst*?" Will put a bit of a sneer into his next words, his voice dipping down. "You do realize that I analyze crime scenes, Mr. Budge, I'm not a psychic."

It might have been the entire reason Will was sitting there, nursing shitty coffee and playing stupid games with a serial killer he doubted was real. Meeting Will had been a stressor for Budge; getting so close to someone tied to the Maestro case was a surge of adrenalin impossible to turn off. Ultimately being caught by that same person had magnified Will's standing in his mind. Budge imagined that they'd looked at each other, and that somehow in a brief, distracted exchange Will had seen him for what he was. He imagined that perhaps Will had designed the profile to fit Budge, subconsciously or otherwise. It was grandiose thinking, and Budge was nothing if not grandiose.

Budge looked ready to swoon with self-importance. "I thought when I met you that you were a disappointment. Franklyn was so hideous, you know, dragging me over there, ready to make a scene because Dr. Lecter had dumped him onto another psychiatrist. I was furious, but then I saw your glassy eyes and all that champagne, and I thought there wasn't anything to worry about after all. I thought, 'he can barely look at me.'" He laughed ruefully. "You knew then, didn't you?"

"I can honestly say I did not know or care who you were," Will said. "I still don't. You're in jail, and you're going to be for a very long time, and that's the extent of my caring."

"Nonsense. You wouldn't have caught me if you weren't invested in your work. I know Franklyn talked about me to Dr. Lecter; did he pass it along to you?"

"Dr. Lecter and I don't make a habit of discussing our work."

Budge smiled again, that time so broadly that he looked handsome instead of crazy and sinister. His teeth were extremely white. "What an interesting relationship. What do you talk about? I bet the two of you have so much in common."

"Now we're talking about my relationship with Dr. Lecter?" Will tapped one of the pens against the tabletop, small, impatient plastic clicks. "This can't be how you want to spend your time."

"I've got nothing but time, Mr. Graham. You know, seeing the two of you together is like watching a thoroughbred mount a mutt. Very off-putting to witness."

Will had seen that exact scenario occur, and it wasn't any more disturbing than the usual way animals coupled. He was nearly amused to realize that he had no idea which of them was supposed to have been the thoroughbred. Budge clung to classism like a limpet, but his regard for Lecter seemed to have been as only a proxy to Will, so it was hard to say. "I'm sure we're an interesting pair. Look, unless you're interested in telling me something useful, or if you're prepared to give us a signed confession, I think our time here is up."

He stood up from the metal chair, taking the rest of his still-warm coffee with him, and Budge made no attempt to stop him.

"I don't care about giving any confession. I have no plans to make the prosecution's job any easier."

"Your loss," Will said. He thought about taking the pad and pens with him, but someone was going to come in to get Budge anyway.

He was nearly to the door when Budge said the one thing he'd been hoping to have avoided, the dread in his stomach he'd felt from the moment Jack appeared in his classroom. "What did you mean when you said I was peacocking?"

Will thought for a moment, testing the weight of the lie he had tucked on his tongue, ready to employ it unless he could think of something better. There was nothing, and even if it were some fucked up dream, he didn't want to poke holes in it any more than he had to. He'd felt like an intrusion the entire time, but the alternative—coming clean, telling someone he was out of place or stuck in his own head—meant nothing good. "You made a production out of your murders," Will said simply. He couldn't get the second part of it out, his poor excuse about meaning to say something else and fumbling it. It was too ludicrous.

He'd let Budge stew in it, try and figure out if it was some sort of puzzle or code. So what if he brought it up at trial? They could pass it off as unstable Will Graham, his crazy brain leaking out of his mouth, but they couldn't erase the evidence. And Budge didn't seem interested in building much of a defense so much as making himself a nuisance.

"Give my regards to Jack Crawford, will you?"

Will shut the door to the interview room behind him.

He had only a breath of peace, though, not enough for his pulse to settle back into normalcy, because he was back in the bustle of a police station—and Alana was standing not six feet from him. Her boots clacked as she came nearer. Her face, free from the strain of grief and pretense, was as quenching as water. Or maybe it was a shot of something potent. Will swallowed hard and fought dizziness.

"Hey," she said.

"What're you doing here?" he asked, too shaken to have been anything but blunt.

"Jack asked me to consult on the Maestro case."

"Jack asked you to babysit me on the Maestro case, you mean," he said. The ground was starting to firm under his feet, but he was still having trouble looking at her, even her pretty gold and green blouse and the wavy ends of her hair.

Alana knew him well enough not to take him personally. "I'll have you know that my services are in high demand." She waited a moment, studying his face, and smiled. "Come on, I'll walk you out to your car."

It was a long journey to the front doors of the station; Will had to sign out, and Alana had to temporarily do the same. Neither of them spoke to each other, maneuvering through uniformed police officers and detectives until they reached the street. He was parked quite a distance away, and he indicated that she should follow him. It took her a while to warm up to whatever it was she wanted to say. It was a pretty friendly warm-up from her end, but Will still felt tense.

"So, Jack has you working the case?"

Walking at his side, she nodded. Will had a nervous, fast walk by nature, but she kept pace with no problems. "He's helping the prosecution build a case, and they want strategy for the trial. Since the only person he'll apparently talk to is you, that makes it more complicated, but it's pretty standard."

"What do you think?"

Alana shrugged and made a moue of consideration, her face scrunching with it. Even though all Will could stand was to look at parts of her, and though he took only darting glances, he couldn't stop himself. "He's definitely fixated on you, and we all know why. Eventually he's going to feel compelled to take the stand, even though he knows better. His plan was not to be taken alive, and now that it's gone, he's scrambling to decide what to do instead. He can't stay silent forever. If we increase the press coverage and go on record with a few observations, it might speed him up."

They had to stop at a light. Cars sped past and stirred up a breeze from air that was already cold but not freezing; Will worried for her without her coat. "You're right," he said, pushing the button to walk a little too forcefully and a few more times than strictly necessary. "If I could get him to talk about something more than bullshit, I would."

"It's not your responsibility anymore, Will." They hurried to cross when the light changed, but Alana didn't stop speaking. "You helped catch him, and now it's someone else's job to make sure he stays locked up." Finally close to his Volvo, they slowed. Alana had her arms crossed to ward off the chill, and Will considered offering his jacket, but she didn't seem like the type to take it, and he thought it might have been an awkward gesture anyway. "I didn't actually want to talk to you about Budge," she admitted wryly, peeking up at him to see if he was looking anywhere in the vicinity of her face.

"Just wanted to catch up?" Will asked.

"Sort of. I haven't seen you much lately, you've been so busy. And then the Maestro hunt. After Hobbs and the encephalitis, I constantly have to remind myself not to infantalize you with chicken soup and daily phone calls."

Will nearly rocked where he stood. Encephalitis. He'd recovered from a bout of it inside the hospital, right along with the gunshot wound; the memories blended into a miasma of morphine-tinged hell and helplessness. And apparently he'd suffered it here too. "You know I'm always happy to talk to you, with or without infantalization."

She waved it off with a casually self-deprecating air Will had attempted before but fell short of. Alana made every human interaction look effortless, and she put him at greater ease than nearly anyone had ever managed. "I know. And Hannibal makes better chicken soup than I do, anyway."

She ducked her gaze to her shoes and chuckled, and Will knew he ought to have done the same, but laughing about Lecter was an impossibility most of the time. *Get a grip, Graham. This isn't the same Alana. You're not supposed to be the same. You dated Lecter, you didn't pursue her. Focus.*

He didn't have to run himself through the usual paces to get into the other Will Graham mindset; it was getting easier, a gentler process. His posture relaxed, and his gnawing desire to both run from her and seek her absolution quieted to a forgettable ache.

"If you don't want to catch up and you don't want to talk about Budge, what is it?" Will asked.

"It's about Abigail. Hannibal told you about her requests?"

"To speak with us?" Will shifted, slipping his hands into his pockets and leaning against the side of his car. "Yeah. We both think Freddie Lounds is behind that."

Alana shook her head. "No, I don't think so. At least not entirely. She's a very strong-willed girl, and we've been keeping her interactions with Lounds as minimal as possible. I think

she's reaching out to you both out of her own desire to make sense of what happened. It's becoming …" Alana raised her eyebrows, considering. "A distraction."

"Do you think I should go talk to her? Will it help with her therapy?"

"I don't know. I can't say for sure. I know that when you first went to see her, it upset her, but she was still in shock, and there was a lot of suspicion about her involvement with her father's crimes. Now? It might be cathartic. Abigail's a little hard to read."

You don't know the half of it. Will pushed that away; the person he was supposed to have been might have suspected Abigail's involvement in her father's crimes, but he wouldn't let it overcome his sympathy for her. Bad enough he'd decided to let slip to Lecter that he'd had an apparent about-face on the subject of her innocence. "Hannibal said we'd just irritate a healing wound."

"He may be right. He was right about her mental state before, but we both know he hasn't spoken to her since. I'm not recommending that the both of you see her regularly, but she might have some questions you can help answer. It really depends on you, what you're comfortable with."

Will was quiet, thinking. He'd planned on seeking out Abigail Hobbs, just to reassure the animal part of his brain that mourned for her; *look, she's alive, even if it's only in my head.* He didn't need to tell Alana any of that. And if she knew he was absolutely sure that Abigail helped her father, she wouldn't want him anywhere near her, not with how Will typically handled discord. Even if Alana felt the same, she cared too much about Abigail to shake her up like that. "I know Hannibal isn't going to be excited about the idea. But I could probably answer a few questions, if you're sure she's not just acting as Lounds' puppet."

"I'm pretty sure she's not. She knows a lot about you, about what you did. I think she's naturally curious." She paused, pushing aside a few strands of hair that the wind had blown into her lip-gloss. "I can be there, if you need me to be."

"I don't think I'll need the safety net, but thanks. I appreciate it."

Somewhere down the block, a car alarm went off. Will's startle reflex was overdeveloped even in the best of times; he watched Alana notice him jerk in reaction, his shoulders hiking nearly to his ears. "Um," he said, too loud, as the incessant shriek of the alarm continued, "I should probably get going, but Hannibal wanted me to extend a dinner invitation. Both of us did," he said, realizing it sounded like he'd sounded compelled to ask. "You've been … invaluable."

"Oh." Alana was honestly surprised—nearly incredulous, actually. Will watched her eyebrows raise and her mouth part in an involuntary expression of incredulity. She covered it up well, but he saw it all the same. "Well, I'd never turn down an invitation from you and Hannibal."

There was a note of falseness in her tone, the first sign of something amiss between them. Will surreptitiously took a more full-on view of her. Her posture was still relaxed, despite her folded arms and the car alarm that was still ear piercing to Will's senses. Whatever her issue,

Alana was doing her absolute best to conceal it. The shift had only happened when he alluded to Lecter and himself as a pair, which led him to one conclusion; they were a source of tension for her. Will just didn't know why. Had Will made a pass at her? Had Lecter? Were the feelings she'd professed to having for Will, in waking life, making things awkward for all of them?

Will discarded the last. Alana was an unfailingly nice person with a professional poker face that didn't extend well to her personal life, and he would have noticed quashed hopes within the span of sixty seconds. It was definitely Lecter. An ethical objection? Will filed it away to poke at Lecter about later.

He gave her a sheepish look. "I may have drunk all of his beer."

"It's good beer," Alana said, that time with a generous smile.

"It is. I'll pick you up a microbrew in consolation."

She made a face. "I'll bring my own. I've seen the kind of beer you drink." Another smile, and she started to step backwards, still facing him. "Thank you for the invitation. Text me to let me know what nights you're both available."

Will nodded. She didn't seem eager to get away, exactly, but there was a pall over the conversation now. And he'd bet that half of her was still in the police station with Budge. "Don't let Budge run any scams. Play up your connection with me, it might get him to start talking."

"I've got it. I don't think he can keep silent for much longer as it is. And Jack just wants straight reporting, anyway. It's no skin off my back if he won't talk to me." She gave a little shrug, and Will unlocked his Volvo, nearly hitting the own alarm button on the key fob with his inattention. "Drive safe, Will."

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Most cafeterias smelled the same, whether they were at a school, a psychiatric facility, or one of the many conference centers he'd frequented over the years—Will liked attending lectures, and he'd spent a lot of time eating bland food with the sting of bleach in his nose in his quest to frequent them. The Port Haven facility did its best to seem homey, and it was more successful than most places of its ilk, but plastic trays, milk cartons, and long, scuffed tables went a long way toward ruining that image. Abigail sat by herself at one of the tables, a book in one hand and a spoon for her yogurt in the other. Her hair was down, and behind the dark sheet of it she could have been any of the other pale young women cooped up in Port Haven's walls, but the persimmon scarf deftly tied at her neck was unmistakable.

She didn't notice Will until he shuffled close enough to cast a shadow over her book. It was something Alana had brought her, too new to have been part of Port Haven's library, and Will watched her fingers tighten on the cover when she noticed his presence. He braced himself for the cold shock of her blue eyes, but he was surprised when she turned them on him with curiosity and he only felt relief.

"Hello," he said, hands in his pockets and making as generally unassuming a figure as he could manage.

"Will Graham," she said, not with the ease of familiarity but the echo of fixation, probably aided by Freddie Lounds. She used a bookmark she'd kept tucked in the back of the novel to mark her spot. "They told me you weren't coming back."

"Dr. Bloom told me you wanted to speak with me." He paused, lifting his eyebrows at the nurses hugging the walls, as if they were somehow less noticeable that way, and the few patients who'd come to the cafeteria, like Abigail, simply to whittle away some of the day. "Do you want to take a walk? Are you done with your yogurt?"

"I can be." She set her plastic spoon down in the yogurt cup, managing to keep everything balanced and upright in a way Will never could. "Did Dr. Lecter come with you?"

"Not today. He's a very busy man." He did not tell her that Dr. Lecter had absolutely no plans to speak with her, and would probably have a coronary over the idea of Will visiting, especially on his own. Will didn't know if he was capable of that level of candor with his own late Abigail Hobbs, but he certainly wasn't with this dream version. He turned his unassuming expression into something hopefully more encouraging. "So, a walk? The gardens here look nice."

"Sure," Abigail said slowly, gaze darting around as if unsure of his safety as a place to settle. He wondered for a moment how deeply Freddie's claws had sunk, but it could have just been surprise making her antsy. And he knew she'd never really been at ease with him, no matter his clumsy attempts at bonding. Eventually Abigail stood up and gathered her things.

Will didn't attempt small talk as Abigail took her yogurt to the trash and led them out of the cafeteria and through the checkered-tile hallways of the hospital. He'd been on this exact route multiple times, but he didn't let his knowledge of the place show. He hung back as she chatted with one of the orderlies and retrieved her coat; the aquamarine reminded him of Alana, as did the soft scarf she wore. He wondered what Abigail would have chosen if left to her own devices. Something less chic? She was likely as comfortable in jeans and flannel as Will, but she wore the clothes Alana bought her well.

Outside, he let her set the place. It was a garden well designed with the sort of symmetry and skill to indicate that landscapers maintained it. The therapy garden patients tended to was a lot more rudimentary and was located in the back of the facility. That time of year, not much was growing, but he saw a few stubborn plants, rows of sculpted bushes, and beautiful bare trees with spindly limbs.

"Did Alana tell you why I wanted to talk?"

"She said you had questions. And I owe you what answers I can give."

Abigail nodded. She slipped her hands into her pockets, and Will watched the wind play with the ends of her hair and scarf. *Wind-chaffed skin*, he remembered, watching her face color with the breeze of the day and the cold. She flushed a peachy pink color, the apples of her

cheeks the darkest, almost red. "It isn't just for the book. Freddie said she had enough about you for the book."

Will repressed a snort. "I'll bet she does."

She heard the droll distaste in his voice despite his efforts to keep it level and turned to him, eyes steady on his face for the first time. "It isn't anything personal. Dr. Lecter told me I was forfeiting your privacy, and I'm sorry for that, but I don't …" Her mouth trembled like she was searching for words, but then it firmed. "I hate it here, but if I don't do something, outside it'll be worse. They said they might release me soon, and I can go live my life, but I have no money. The families of my dad's victims are filing suits for all of our—my—assets. One of the doctors said that I could go to a halfway house and transition to independent living that way." Her tone was nearly hollow; the idea of a halfway house terrified her.

"That won't happen," Will said immediately, nearly shuddering at the idea himself. "No matter what your situation is, I can't see Alana letting that happen. I wouldn't let it happen. You have people on your side, Abigail, not just Freddie Lounds."

They both kept walking up the garden's meandering path, boots crunching on the gravel. "The book is my only real chance. I can tell my story, I can make my own money, and I can leave this state and not look back. I'm sorry if it's intruding on your and Dr. Lecter's lives, but I don't know what else to do."

He remembered how intently he and Lecter tried to dissuade her from it before, and he still saw the wisdom in it; it invited more scrutiny, and eventually she would fade into relative obscurity otherwise. It put a blinding spotlight on a case the FBI would rather everyone forget about; the murders themselves, the lethal final stand Hobbs made when he was caught, and Will's worrying overkill. And Will certainly didn't need the extra attention. But far removed from his actual life, faced with a living version of Abigail Hobbs, however fanciful, he found himself less vehemently opposed. "But does it have to be Freddie Lounds?" he asked, trying to make a joke of it.

"No one else covered the case like she did. And I … don't hate her." Abigail looked, for a second, amused. "She has reasons for working with me, I know that, but she's brutally honest in her own way. And I know she'll tell my story the way the best way it can be told."

Knowing what he did, Will found the nuances of that particularly sticky. "If you need to do it, I'm not going to stand in your way. I'll talk to you, but I'm not going anywhere near Freddie Lounds." He dragged his boot across a rock bigger than the gravel they were walking over, pushing hard enough to feel the edge through his thick sole. "Am I going to open that book and find a sensationalized version of everything I tell you today?"

Abigail shook her head. "No. I wouldn't do that. That's not why I wanted to talk to you. I just—I wanted to know how you caught my dad. No one will tell me." She spotted a bench a little ways ahead of them, and Will followed her to it. She settled herself on it gingerly, the material of her pants not quite right for the outdoor weather. She put her book next to her. "I thought you were trying to help me understand what happened, but then you just disappeared."

Will worked his jaw for a moment, aware that Abigail was at once showing the ragged edges of her own pain and using Will's empathy, his sympathy, to get the reaction she wanted from him. It was pretty masterful for a teenager. After learning about her role in her father's crimes, however unwilling, it was easy to see behavior when before he'd been blind to it. It didn't soften the place in him that hurt for her, that liked her; if anything, it put it in sharper relief. "It's inappropriate for me to insert myself in your life. You have to see that."

It was her turn to barely resist a snort. "Everything about my life now is inappropriate. I'm supposed to be an adult, but people follow me around to make sure I eat, that I shower, that I make my bed because routine is supposed to be *healthy*. Every moment is planned. And I have to talk about the worst day of my life over and over, until everyone looks *bored* with it. I'm nearly bored with it."

She cut herself off from the torrent of words, setting her teeth to the inside of her lip and worrying at it. It took a few measured breaths, probably learned from the very same therapy she was impatient with, before she turned pensive and regained her footing in the moment. Will brought himself closer, knowing then that she wouldn't mind it. He didn't sit next to her on the bench; it was too much intimacy for both of them. "I know you and Freddie don't get along, I know what she says about you, but both you and Dr. Lecter were there that day. You caught my dad."

"It's natural," Will assured her. "The pull you feel towards both of us. We all lived through different parts of the same traumatic event."

"You do it for a living, though," she said, urgent like she was picking at something like it would unravel and show her its truth. "Do you feel a pull toward everyone you save?"

"I don't save people very often. What happened with your dad was extremely unusual. It was just an unlucky strike. You asked how I caught him—that was it, just dumb luck. An oddity in his paperwork. It could have been someone else who came to interview him that day."

A distant but sad smile slowly curled the corners of Abigail's mouth. "I wouldn't be alive if it was someone else. As soon as my dad saw you guys pull up, it was over for me and mom. If Dr. Lecter hadn't been there, I'd be in a cemetery."

"I'm very glad he was there, as terrible as it was." The scene must have been much the same, despite the lack of forewarning from the mysterious man on the phone—fucking Lecter. Will didn't necessarily give off a cop vibe, but someone as paranoid and meticulous as Garret Jacob Hobbs would recognize a police-issued vehicle when he saw one. "I know our absence makes it seem like we don't care about you, but that's not true. We didn't want to make things confusing."

"I'm not confused," she said, fairly steadily, and then glanced at her hands. "Freddie told me the two of you are dating."

Oh, Christ. Will felt himself flush and roil with the urge to tell her *not in a thousand fucking years*. Instead, he cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"Were you dating when you caught my dad?" she asked, and it seemed like general curiosity; Lounds would have figured out the timeline of events, so she wasn't asking for ulterior motives, just her own fascination.

"No, we weren't. It's pretty new." His own timeline was muddled; he wished he had Lounds' resources to smooth it out. He'd only listened to a few full sessions, and despite the jarring differences between Will's actual life and what was in the mp3s, everything seemed to be on the up-and-up between the two of them. There wasn't any flirting so far, or mentions of much happening that Will wasn't familiar with outside of Lecter's office hours.

"Um, congratulations," she said haltingly, as though suddenly realizing the awkwardness of discussing a middle-aged man's love life with another man more than old enough to be her father. That was an uncomfortable thought; Will attempted to discard it.

"Thanks," he said.

"Dr. Lecter doesn't want to talk to me, does he?" Abigail said, smoothing her palms across her thighs. "He was pretty short the last time I tried."

"I don't want to speak for—for Hannibal," he said, fumbling over his last-minute decision to use his first name; Will would, if this were a real situation. "But we've talked about you, and he's more concerned with potentially interfering with your treatment. And we had different experiences. We just see things differently."

"You see me differently, you mean."

"I guess so, yeah. But we both care about you. Dr. Lecter's a psychiatrist; he has different standards to comply with than I do."

Abigail looked away, mulling that over. Her profile was one of the more exceptional parts of her; from a distance she was perhaps plain, the template for an average Midwestern girl, but coming closer warranted a deeper view. Pale skin, a few dark freckles, piercingly blue China doll eyes; the strength of will he knew she had imbued basic features with something unnamable, something found even in her photos. While she was in a coma, he saw a few photographs of her in evidence; a smiling, unfussy girl attractive enough to fill a stock picture frame, but there was life in her. If Will had stumbled upon her photo during the course of the investigation, he might have known her as the source of the Shrike's obsession immediately, and not just because she fit his type to perfection.

"Your boss, Jack Crawford, he had a lot of questions for me. He told me it was routine, but he kept coming. Dr. Lecter didn't answer my calls, and Alana told me not to worry about it. I knew I was under suspicion—Freddie told me they graffitied the house, I don't even know if it's been painted over—but I didn't think I was actually a suspect."

That time, Will had little idea of how to respond. He thought she was probably fishing for an assurance of her own innocence—something Will would have easily given her as a comfort before, a reminder that she was not like her father, that none of it was her fault. She must

have loved and hated it. If the FBI's infamous profiler couldn't see her guilt, she was safe, right? At the same time, every firm testimony of her innocence from Will would have grated like sandpaper.

He didn't have those convictions any longer. Even though she hadn't taken a hunting knife to Nicholas Boyle, and though he considered her a victim above all else, she was still complicit. He couldn't wish that away. "What are you asking me?"

"Does Dr. Lecter consider me a suspect? Is that why he won't talk to me?" Imploringly, she looked up at him. She looked a little pissed, actually, or indignant, and Will thought it was genuine. She'd been abandoned by two men who had ruined her life and saved it in almost the same turn. Whatever her own feelings or level of rationalization about what she'd done under the sway of her father, she was side-stepping them to deal with something less complicated and more immediate. She set her chin in preparation for his answer.

"No one thinks you're a *suspect*," he said. "You don't have to worry about that."

"We both know that isn't true. Agent Crawford thinks I'm a suspect, and half the people in this state think I'm a suspect. They all think I helped my dad. You didn't; you told me you understood what happened to me, and it's your job to understand. But then you wouldn't come around, Dr. Lecter wouldn't come around. Sometimes Alana looks at me like I'm something she can't figure out. The staff in this place avoid me unless I do something I'm not supposed to, and the patients here, the ones who can hold a conversation, they do too."

He pictured her climbing the walls, literally and figuratively, desperate to escape, to find somewhere to go where she wasn't judged. Without Will, without Lecter, she had no such refuge. He felt an ache of remorse for that, a hint of pain that wasn't his own, but it was hardly the first time he'd felt bad over Abigail Hobbs' plight.

"It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks, Abigail," he said, struggling to sound as sincere as he was, but refusing to outright lie. She was piqued, ready to pounce the first time she thought she saw or heard him misleading her, so it was a delicate balance. "You can't change any of what happened. I'm sorry I wasn't around before, but I'm here now, I can answer your questions. I'm not Jack Crawford or anyone else; you don't have to prove yourself to me."

She nodded again, jerkily, and he thought he'd managed to appease her, but she studied him for a moment, and her eyes suddenly widened. When she spoke, it was a whispered accusation; another instance of betrayal by her count. "You don't believe me."

Will shook a little, but it was mostly an internal reaction. He didn't want this; he wanted to see Abigail Hobbs alive, see what problems she had that he could reasonably address, maybe untangle her from Lounds' web a bit, and reassure himself of this better fate for her, real or imaginary. He'd nearly forgotten Abigail's inherent, stubborn refusal to cooperate with plans. She'd dug up Nicholas Boyle's body; the truth, for her, festered if buried. "No," he said, as gently as he could. "I know you helped your father."

She went white, impossibly white in the harsh winter sunlight, and stared ahead into the middle distance for a long moment. "I didn't," she said, low in her throat, a little bit above a

whisper.

Will rubbed at his forehead, ill prepared and not the ideal person to hold a mirror up to Abigail's worst fears about herself. He was always, always too blunt, even when he tried his best to be kind. "He used you to make them comfortable, as bait. You found out where they lived and their schedules, when they'd be alone. He couldn't have done any of it on his own—befriended a young woman traveling on a train by herself. He *used you*," he said, stressing it so that she might understand the distinction.

She said nothing. And still, after long moments, more nothing. Helplessly, Will stood there and looked down at her. The residual, impotent anger he felt towards Abigail—for hiding it from him, for putting him in such an impossible position, for being remarkable enough to hold his strange, obsessive interest, for being a catalyst for her father's madness—bubbled up in him. It had nowhere to go in the wake of her death, and they'd never sat down to discuss what had happened; Will had to fight to keep it from spilling out now, at the worst possible moment. He didn't want to hurt her. Some hurt was inevitable—she'd never move past it if she didn't face it, if she didn't share the truth with someone—but he could spare her his own messiness.

"I think I should go inside now," she said, licking dry lips and flickering a glance to him. Her face was still rigid with shock, panic building behind her eyes, but she had brittle control over it. "It's cold."

Will, frustrated by his own limitations, sighed. "Okay. I'll walk you back."

Their walk back the gravel path was slow; she moved like a person dazed, and Will kept wanting to reach out and touch her, to steady her, and to remind himself of her vitality. He didn't say anything else, and anything he might have mustered up would have driven her into a spiral of primal fear. He did, as an attempt to forestall that, see her inside through taking off her coat and say, "It's over. I'm not going to tell anyone."

She looked as though she understood and even partially believed him, but it was more likely that she desperately wanted to and would recognize that desperation, replaying the sentence looking for a lie or a loophole. Feeling hollow, Will unclipped his visitor badge and handed it over, watching as Abigail made her way down the hall to find somewhere to be alone.

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He was a glass deep into a new bottle of Black Bush. He had two missed calls on his cell phone, but Will felt too fragmented to answer; half of him was still in Port Haven with Abigail, replaying ways their conversation could have gone. The other half of him was close to sloshed.

Once the dogs were fed, watered, and taken outside for a quick run around the area of flattened, scrubby grass and gravel that made up Will's yard, he'd taken himself inside, eaten half of a frozen dinner, and showered.

Tired and light-headed, he'd plugged his laptop in and started the next in the series of session

recordings. The whiskey was to gentle himself toward sleep, but it also helped calm the lurch in his stomach every time he heard the low tones of Lecter speaking to him. Will wasn't fond of the sound of his own voice, either; he heard all of its quavers and false stops, the standoffishness that made him seem curmudgeonly.

Closing his eyes and inserting himself in the memory of the real version of the session helped. His house fell away by degrees until he was left with a shadowed version of Lecter's office. Will remembered the small things; what shirt he wore that day, the pattern of Lecter's tie.

It was autumn, nearly winter. Elliott Budish was turning people into angels, and Will was not sleeping well, to put it mildly.

The session went much the same as it had in reality. He turned to Lecter for help in solving the Angel Maker case; his appearance at Lecter's house in Baltimore, though, after waking to find himself in the middle of the road, went unmentioned. That didn't break from script; neither had brought it up during their next session, but Will didn't know if things had progressed the same in his dream.

"Are you trying to alienate me from Jack Crawford?" The part of Will not standing near Dr. Lecter's desk with a book in his hand, smiled humorlessly. He took another sip of whiskey with his eyes still shut, and he felt a drop of it escape the seal of his mouth to the glass and slide down his neck. He retained enough awareness of his physical body to wipe it away.

"I'm trying to help you to understand this angel-maker you seek."

Will had no patience for what he thought was Lecter's deflection. *"Well, help me understand how to catch him."*

"If he were a classic paranoid schizophrenic, you might be able to influence him to become visible."

He took a sip of coffee; it was barely strong enough to make a dent in his fatigue, but Will didn't have the option of taking caffeine pills in front of this unofficial therapist. *"What, scare him out into the daylight?"*

"Might even get him to hurt himself, if he hasn't already. You should proceed cautiously."

The image Will had of the office wavered; Lecter had deviated, and he still had trouble adjusting for those moments. He still felt himself leaning against Lecter's desk, but he became more aware of the reconstruction's flaws; was Lecter's expression different? What if Will was wrong, and the tie he remembered Lecter wearing was swapped out with something else in the dream?

The rest of that session passed over him without making much impact. He felt frozen in Lecter's office, frozen in his bed, and he didn't know whether to come back up for air or immerse himself further.

But then, near the end of the conversation, as Will recalled grabbing his coat from the stand, things took a turn for the totally unfamiliar. Will opened his eyes, breaking the surface of his reconstruction and leaving it behind for the present of his bedroom. Winston was staring at him from the foot of the bed, head on his paws, but Will didn't so much as reach out and scratch his ears; he was too distracted by what he was hearing.

"I'm glad you decided to come back."

"Of course I came back. I don't have a choice." He didn't even sound bitter; Will's words were colored with dull acceptance.

"You have the choice to ask to speak with someone else. To tell Jack our conversations are no longer necessary. To skip today's appointment and come back once your anger has cooled."

"I'm not angry." The denial wasn't very convincing, considering its petulance.

"You were furious when I advised you to stop seeing Abigail Hobbs." Will found himself tensing up; there was a quantifiable difference in Hannibal Lecter, something so far outside of Will's understanding as to rattle him.

"I disagreed with you. I was civil."

"I would not be a very good psychiatrist if I could not tell when I had deeply angered someone, Will. But still you came to me this morning, and you put aside your disagreement to ask for my help with your angel-maker."

There was a pause. A shuffle of a sound. Maybe Will pushing himself away from the desk to pace the floor, as he often did when he was agitated. *"I don't think it's your place to tell me what to do about Abigail Hobbs."*

Lecter did not sound offended. *"Isn't it? We are the only three people to have survived a brush with Garret Jacob Hobbs. We saved her life together."*

"You said you felt obligated before. Now you don't?"

"I do feel obligated. It was not only on Jack's orders that I went with you to Port Haven. I wanted to see that she was well. But after our conversation, it became evident that any interaction with Abigail would only prolong her healing process. The things she needs, we cannot give her. And the things she wants from us aren't healthy."

Will was definitely pacing. It sounded like he had a hand to his face, muffling his next words. *"I'm not suggesting that we—that **I**—become her surrogate father. But she's alone, and no one else understands what she went through."*

"Do you understand because you were there, or because of your remarkable empathy?"

*"Both. But I don't need **remarkable** empathy to see that a lonely, orphaned girl needs help understanding her nightmares."*

"Are you lonely, Will?"

"What?" Will took a sip from his glass; his hands shook, but he thought that might have been the day's exhaustion catching up with him.

"You eschew most social interactions, but I can't imagine that the sort of man who adopts and cares for creatures in need truly longs for isolation."

"It's complicated."

"I have no doubt. Abigail Hobbs is young, Will, and in a delicate mental state. With time, she will recover and learn to live a full life. In the meantime, it would be far too easy for you, for both of us, to take on more of her burden than is necessary, and in doing so give her some of our own." Will finally finished the glass and set it aside. Lecter was waiting for Will's answer, but the wait lengthened until it proved Will had nothing to say. *"Whatever you decide, I want you to know that you have people to rely on; you have Alana Bloom, you have me, and in some respects you even have Jack Crawford."*

"Two psychiatrists and my boss. That doesn't sound very healthy."

"I hope you see me as more than a psychiatrist. As I told you this morning, my door is open to you. For whatever you need."

"I'll keep that in mind."

That was it; Will heard his footfalls as he left the office, and he heard Lecter climb down from the mezzanine, then the click of him ending the recording.

He felt curiously wired, borderline drunk and still light-headed, and his eyes were starting to water from a combination of all three. His laptop was still open in front of him, and Winston had given up on the hope of receiving attention and fallen asleep. Will cast a glance back at his clock—eleven-thirty. He didn't have to be up early unless Jack called him. Strictly speaking, he didn't have to get up early for anything. Playing at living his life was not his only option; he could, if he wanted, pull the metaphorical covers over his head and wait until he woke up.

Sometimes he thought he was in a coma, that perhaps every now and then he heard the beep of machines or the daily aid of nurses filtering through and coloring the fabric of his dream. It might have been a fanciful explanation, but Will didn't have much else. Dreams usually came in self-contained bursts of five to ten-minute intervals, longer in deep sleep, no matter if it sometimes it felt like years went by. They also usually had a lack of consistency and a fuzziness that Will couldn't attribute to this one; whatever it was, he knew it would be far too easy to lose himself in. If he ever got the knack for navigating interactions with Lecter. Hannibal. Whatever.

He leaned forward enough to open the next file, dated for later that week.

"The sleepwalking is getting worse. I woke up on the roof today. I wondered what would have happened if the dogs barking hadn't jostled me out of it. I think at best I'd be in a cast.

Depending on how I landed."

"That is worrying. And your headache has not improved?"

No answer. Will assumed he'd nodded.

"Insufficient sleep may be the root cause. And that is likely a symptom of your continued stress."

"I spend half the night struggling to fall asleep, and then after I do, I wake up," he paused, and Will heard the rattle of pills in a plastic bottle; the headache that dogged him for what felt like months. His brain cooking in its fever-heat. He heard himself shake a few into his palm. *"I wake up literally on the edge. Or in the street."*

"It's difficult to lie still and fear going to sleep. What is there to think about? You listen to your breathing in the dark and the tiny clicks of your blinking eyes."

"I dream more now than I used to."

"Well, your dreams were the one place you could be physically safe, relinquishing control. Not anymore." Will found himself laughing aloud at that; he nearly startled at the sound of his own voice. One of the dogs huffed in their sleep.

"I thought about zipping myself up into a sleeping bag before I go to sleep, but it, heh, sounds like a poor man's straightjacket."

"Have you determined how this angel-maker is choosing his victims?"

"Well, he doesn't see people how everyone else sees them. He can tell if you're naughty or nice, or ... he thinks he can."

"So God has given this person insight into the souls of men."

"God didn't give him insight; God gave him a tumor. He's just a man whose brain is playing tricks on him."

He was far too inside himself to drop back into his own mind; the details of this session were fuzzy and becoming fuzzier by the minute. But he remembered that damn stag statue. It was easier to examine its bronze antlers than to put his attention on Lecter. They were standing much closer than they usually did during sessions. Or maybe the other Will was used to that by then.

What Will expected to come next did not. The feeling of urgency built in him until he found himself leaning forward, straining towards his laptop's slightly tinny speakers.

"Can you empathize with someone whose behavior is being dictated by disease as opposed to a disorder?"

"I don't know, I think so. I've tried to reconstruct his thinking, find his patterns. Those are still there, even if the cause is unusual."

"Instead you find yourself in a behavior pattern you can't break. You realize you have a choice?"

"What is it?"

The swish of Lecter's trousers as he came closer. Will tensed instinctively.

"Angel-maker will be destroyed by what's happening inside his head. You don't have to be."

His inhale was imperceptible to whatever Lecter used to make the recording, but not to Will Graham.

"Did you just smell me?"

"Difficult to avoid. I really must introduce you to a finer aftershave. That smells like something with a ship on the bottle."

"Well, I keep getting it for Christmas."

"Have your headaches been any worse lately? More frequent?"

"Yes, actually."

Will broke their bubble of tense proximity by walking away. Lecter stayed where he was, voice muted with distance even as Will's became clearer.

"I thought at first that your physiological symptoms were brought on by the stress of the work you are expected to do. The sign of a man pushed too far. Pardon my candor, but you smell feverish."

"What?"

There was a bit of wry humor when Lecter spoke again. *"I have a particularly sensitive olfactory system. It's a blessing and a curse. My wine pairings are impeccable, but I can smell if someone walked through a cloud of cigarette smoke two days ago. I apologize, but it's not something I can shut off."*

"You're saying you think I have a fever?"

"The fever is a symptom of whatever is ailing you; it could be stress, which takes an honest toll on the body that you should not ignore. But it could also be the sign of something more serious. An infection, perhaps."

"Or a brain tumor." It was supposed to be a joke, but it didn't land like one.

"That may be stretching credulity. You are not the same as the angel-maker."

"I know."

"You should see a doctor, in any case."

"You went to medical school."

"I am not that kind of doctor, Will, and you are well aware of that fact."

"I just meant that you could give me a referral."

"I can. I will be happy to. I know any number of capable physicians in the Baltimore area."

"Thanks." Will knew he was working himself up to something. *"Out of curiosity, what did I smell like?"*

"As you've deduced," Lecter said, sounding amused, *"my heightened sense of smell is also something of a party trick. Under the cloud of aftershave, you mostly smell of dog. There are some traces of motor oil. You had a sandwich on rye bread for lunch. And you recently cleaned the inside of your car."*

"That's amazing." Will's tone suggested he was genuinely marveling over it.

"As I said, it has its uses. The one I've found the most helpful is my ability to detect illness. You smelled strangely sweet and very warm. It would be remiss of me not to tell you, even if it is awkward."

"It wasn't awkward. I'll go to the doctor. If nothing else, maybe he can give me something for this never-ending headache."

There was still three or four minutes of the file left to play; Will switched it off and pushed the laptop away from him.

He was shaking and he couldn't stop.

The fucker knew. He knew I had encephalitis; he knew for months.

And yet the false Hannibal Lecter had told him to seek help at the first sign of it. The curdled-milk feeling in Will's stomach, his rage that seemed to find new depths every time he uncovered another one of Lecter's fucking plots, was offset by a strange feeling of relief. It was hard to brush off genuine concern, hard to not soak up the confirmation that someone cared about him, even if it was in his own head.

The laptop made an ominous plastic crashing sound when he shoved it over the edge of the bed to the floor. Winston and a few of the dogs in the room jolted awake; Will heard their distressed barking, and he offered a hand for them to sniff at, but he could not curb the impotent fury that sparked inside of him.

He did not get much sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

If you read the previous chapter's notes on what was supposed to happen this chapter, I was wrong about pretty much everything. Except the recordings! I got those right. Sometimes you plan things meticulously, and then you realize that your plans need to be shunted along to the next chapter. People just kept talking during this one.

As everyone can see, I expanded this from five chapters to six. It's still basically an estimation, but a fairly solid one, probably.

Coming up (probably): A confrontation! Will hears a definite turning point in the session recordings! Bedelia Motherfuckin' Du Maurier!

FYI, if anyone haunts the tumblrverse, you can find me at ahmandahjean.tumblr.com.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> This chapter includes a lot of content under the 'disordered eating' tag. Readers who may be uncomfortable with or could be triggered by such content should be cautious and take care of themselves.
>
> I also had to delete and reup this because AO3 was bein' super dumb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"May I take your coat?" Bedelia Du Maurier asked.

His first instinct was to tell her he was fine keeping it on, but the chill he'd felt making the trip from the car was rapidly forgotten once inside. Her practice was situated in an old four-story rowhouse on the corner of a busy street that had been converted to a commercial space; he'd expected something as drafty as Lecter's building, which always felt a little too cold. But Bedelia's heater worked almost too well.

Will eventually reminded himself to nod and gingerly shrug out of his coat, holding back a wince at the way he had to maneuver his left arm. "Pulled my shoulder," he explained when he saw her zero in on his awkward de-robing.

The thick knot of scar tissue on his bicep was months into healing, reddened around the edges and raised like braille on the paper of his skin. It pulled and twinged whenever he used his arm, and Barney had only recently stopped smearing antibiotic ointment on it several times a week; healing from a gunshot wound was a laborious process and not one to take chances with. Will had examined it a few times, but only to assess how bad the damage was and to file the information away like any other detail about a case. Except that it pained him occasionally, he ignored it. The Will Graham she knew would not have had occasion to have been shot by Jack, though; he hoped the rest of the session could be filled with such tidy lies.

She came closer to take his coat and hung it on a limb of a wooden coat stand. He watched the silky cream material of her blouse bunch and gather as the panes of her torso moved. It was going to be difficult to watch her, to take stock of his surroundings and gain an impression from them, because he'd supposedly done all of that before, and doing it again couldn't be brushed off to boredom or nerves. Will was not practiced at subtle.

He let his attention wander, examining the furnishings, the wallpaper, even her degrees encased in gleaming glass mounted on the wall behind her desk. Her office, charming from the outside with its company of churches and boutiques, tucked away on a street that ribbed off of Charles Street's spine, looked like it belonged in a magazine. Impersonality had its own set of implications, however. He kept that in mind.

As they sat in their respective chairs, he watched her legs in their high denier stockings as she crossed them, then looked at the pad that she balanced on the arm of her chair, sleek black pen held loosely in her fingers. The rest of the office blurred out of shape behind her. *Focus.*

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Lecter again; he'd called that morning, and then left a polite but clipped text message that Will had yet to answer.

There was another text message waiting for him.

Please join me for dinner tonight. Arrive at six if you are able.

Will thumbed back an *ok* and switched his phone off, frowning in apology. "Hannibal," he explained, tucking it back in his pocket. "Finalizing dinner plans. Sorry."

"Well, our session doesn't officially start for another," she made a show of checking her watch, slid the cuff of her blouse away from its face to get a clear view, "forty-eight seconds. Your time is your own until then."

"If we start forty-eight seconds early, does that mean I can leave early too?" he asked.

She granted him with a curve of a polite smile; that was about as well as any of his jokes ever went over. "I apologize if I offended you in calling Hannibal earlier this week," she said, and he knew they were settling in for the long haul. "I was worried when you didn't appear, and he is your emergency contact." Her mouth curved again; that was decidedly not why she'd called him, and they both knew it.

"Yeah," Will said with a sharp nod, then reminded himself to take control of his body language. There was no basis or familiarity for him to delve into. Bedelia Du Maurier, but for a google search and a brief conversation Will had while off-kilter, was a blank slate. A blank slate with a hawk's eye and a face carved out of marble, it seemed. "It was fine. I'm sorry I worried you. I was making progress in the Maestro case and got lost in the research."

"Normally I would write off a missed session," she said, "but with your history, I thought it prudent to make sure you were all right."

His tongue touched his bottom lip briefly, an immediate *"My history?"* nearly slipping out with it. Will restrained himself from asking obvious questions and made an educated guess. He hated guessing. He so rarely had to do it; his abilities, his insight, came with a feeling of surety, and he was rarely wrong when it counted. *Rarely, but not never*, he thought, envisioning Lecter peering at him through bars, gaze alight with fascination. "Encephalitis isn't typically recurring," he said. Will allowed a slow, bitter smile that he felt crease his cheeks. "Or did you mean my *normal* instability?"

Bedelia set down her pen, and it somehow did not roll across the pad of paper and onto the floor. She smoothed one corner of her skirt down over her thigh and left her hand there. "You have a dangerous job," she said, "on occasion. With everything you've been through, I think it's reasonable to worry about your safety."

He wasn't entirely sure what she meant. Either that his job of hunting criminals put him too close to people with a motive to harm him, or that the empathy made him a risk to himself. "I mostly teach now," he pointed out.

"Just a few days ago, you caught Tobias Budge," she countered smoothly, without so much as a flicker in her placid expression. "You view your job as an unfortunate necessity, and that allows you to rationalize the risks you take."

Her head tilted to the side, a wave of old-Hollywood blonde hair caressing the side of her long neck as she did, but her eyes were like glass. That shift, the detached curiosity she was feigning, rang a distant bell that something in him answered in turn. He'd seen it before, but not on Bedelia Du Maurier; he'd seen it on Hannibal Lecter.

What are you? he wondered, and the second thought came before the first finished. *You're his gauge. And occasionally his template.* For a moment, it was though everything he saw aligned; Bedelia Du Maurier's airy, impersonal office superimposed over Lecter's masculine, impersonal office. Their stoic demeanor. The moment ended, and Will was left with Bedelia staring at him expectantly, as remote as before.

Shaken but hiding it, Will blew out a breath with such force that it nearly ruffled his bangs. "I'm not in any danger from Tobias Budge. And I know my job can be dangerous; it's why they issued me a gun. It's why I went back to teaching. And it's why I'm sitting here right now."

"Well, yes. I didn't assume you were here just for the pleasure of my company. What I am curious about, Will, is why you still accept cases, even after encephalitis and the trauma of killing Garret Jacob Hobbs."

"Jack only calls me for the big cases now, like Budge." It was the defense he would have run with in the same situation, so he used it.

One eyebrow arched. "Aren't they all *big cases* with the BAU? By that criteria, Jack could conceivably call you every day."

Will snorted. "He wouldn't. For one, Hannibal wouldn't let him." That was a certainty, and he clung to it; this Hannibal Lecter did not want Will to disappear into the minds of killers, and Will's recent illness was a fairly convincing argument for him to make against it. A small, begrudging part of Will wanted to see the showdown Lecter and Jack must have had over the matter of letting Will back into the field. *Jack let you think he compromised, but the higher-ups would never have allowed me back on anything but a probationary basis anyway,* he thought, picturing Lecter's cold resolve and Jack's chagrin but also his refusal to surrender.

"But you would? You've said before that you find academia rewarding in its own way, and you've acknowledge the importance of the work you do as a teacher. Am I mistaken in thinking that you do just as much good behind a lectern than out in the field?"

"That's ... not an equivalency I'd make."

Bedelia shrugged and glanced down at the pad she hadn't written a word on. She didn't need it. For whatever reason, Will had responded better when she'd performed with the aid of props. "I'm interested in your value system. Why it's so important to you to catch them yourself instead of imparting knowledge so that others may do it."

Others that can actually pass the FBI's screening process, he thought glumly. "It has nothing to do with my value system. It's not immodesty when I say this, trust me, but—there's no one else as good as I am."

"I know that, Will. Our sessions have shown me what a complex and unique mind you have, and your record speaks for itself. But no one else pays the toll that you do, either."

"I caught Budge without paying that toll," he said, and a sliver of the satisfaction over catching him instead of walking past the stain of his death on Lecter's carpet showed in his voice, even if it was a falsehood.

"Did you? What was different about this case to have made you escape it?"

"My brain wasn't boiling inside of my skull; that helped. And I was ... less unstable," he admitted, tracing the patterns of the differences between him and the Will Graham everyone else knew there. The key factor: Hannibal Lecter, as much as admitting that felt like a laughing jab from the fates. "I have a better support system, and Jack doesn't push me too close to the edge now."

Bedelia read 'support system' as the couched admission that it was, and the smile she turned on him was somewhere close to genuine. *She calls him a friend, and she means it.* He wondered for a moment if they'd slept together, but Lecter would have considered referring his current lover to an old one gauche. He then wondered if the Lecter back where Will belonged would have pursued such an avenue—and then he wondered if she existed at all.

When she spoke, he found it hard to force himself out of the impotent self-pity that thought brought on long enough to focus on what she was saying.

"How are you and Hannibal?" she asked.

He'd tried to prepare for that line of questioning, at least. He'd considered using their session as a subtle interrogation, but he'd thrown that out of the window even before he'd met her face to face. He still had questions, and since his mind showed no sign of letting him surface from whatever Wonderland he was in, he needed answers if he were to continue playacting as Lecter's partner.

Still, he couldn't ask too many questions, no matter how badly he wanted answers. The act of asking questions wasn't necessarily suspicious in itself, but Will did not like to open doors he wasn't sure he could close. Will didn't know how much he would have told her about his affair with Lecter, but she obviously knew him outside of their status as colleagues.

"The same," he said, affecting a nonchalant little shrug. He let his face slacken, which he imagined smoothed some of the lines on his face and made him look younger. 'Younger' on him apparently read as 'bashful,' or so he'd gleaned.

"Have you told him about your plans, or are you still hesitant to bring them up?"

'Plans' implied something big, something he was not eager to tell Hannibal. Did he fear a fight? Disapproval? Will shook his head; he assumed it had something to do with the FBI—maybe he wanted to take on more field work—but he also didn't want to make a mistake like he had with Budge and assume. His slip about the Ripper wouldn't touch him, but Bedelia would notice and perhaps even look deeper if he started veering too far off script.

"No, I haven't told him yet. Maybe I will tonight, if it comes up," he said, going for unconvincing.

"You should do it soon. I know I said not to rush the decision, but if you've made your mind up, the first Hannibal hears of it should not be seeing the 'For Sale' sign in your yard."

Disbelief nearly made him gape at her. "I'm selling my house," he said, narrowly managing to not have it come out as a barrage of indignance. *Of course I am. I'm selling my goddamn house and moving closer—moving **in**? No, I'd never do that of my own fucking volition. But I'm moving closer, to spare us the commute. How sweet.* Will's stomach roiled unhappily, acid rising up to burn his throat, and he coughed as he fished in his pocket for a Tums. The roll was half gone from a week or so of a stomach left too often empty. "I'm not asking for his hand in marriage." It came out with a quavery note of bitterness he hoped would be attributed to nerves.

"No, but it is a big step. You said you were very attached to your house."

"I am," he agreed, cracking the chalky peppermint tablet with his teeth. He couldn't imagine wanting to move away from it. It wasn't just the house; in some ways it was inconvenient to have two stories, and the few who visited gave him uncomfortable, pitying looks when they saw that the whole of his living space was arranged in the cramped ground level, bed next to books next to piano next to boat motors. But it was his, bought and paid for. He had it the way he liked it. No neighbors for miles in every direction.

It was that space he couldn't imagine giving up, even with its annoyances, like the scavenging raccoons that set the dogs off into fits of barking in the middle of the night. There was so much he couldn't replicate if he moved closer to civilization. Those miles and miles to wander in the fog when he couldn't sleep. His house was set back from the road, so the only sounds were animal, or the rushing of wind through Linden trees; nothing human. No souls close enough to touch and disturb his. And he'd give that up to make a relationship easier, less burdened by distance.

Will's head dropped, and he studied the grain of the fabric of his pants. It was an immense sacrifice for someone like himself, and it told him exactly how lax he'd been in examining the facets of their relationship. *This isn't something I'd do for an experiment.* The realization left him numb as if with cold at first, but then the discomfiting reality set in like prickles of feeling.

"Do you think he'll have an objection to you moving closer?"

Will considered that as a motivation for the other Will's reticence. He wouldn't make such a bold decision, not without certainty, a halfway decent grasp on the man he was dating. "No," he said, lifting his head. He nearly made eye contact with her, and he felt peeled closer to his core than he would have liked in that moment to begin with. His gaze skittishly traveled to the bridge of her nose. "I'm afraid of what it means," he explained, letting the other Will Graham speak for himself.

Sometimes it's so easy, it's not like becoming someone else. It's like slipping into a warm bath. He felt some of the tension in his limbs ebb.

"That's understandable." Her strange voice shaped its consonants with a softer edge, her version of compassion. The medical degree from St. George's helped explain the rest of its oddness. "You've spent most of your adult life avoiding attachments, and now you're making a remarkable gesture to secure one. What if it doesn't work out?"

Will moved his good shoulder in a lackluster shrug. He felt the edges of the other Will's nervousness, his second-guessing, his obsessive retreading of various scenarios. He pushed it away; it was harder, now that a piece of a puzzle he'd been overcautious in solving had fitted into place. It felt a bit like he'd roused the other Will from sleep, and nothing could take that back. "Then it doesn't work out, and I move back to Wolf Trap."

"Is that feasible?"

"Maybe if I lease the house instead of selling it," Will said, honestly considering it like it was an option. Then his mind turned over a fragment of an idea, and he laughed, watching her offer up another mild smile for his benefit. "Or I could always leave everything behind and start over in Florida."

"What would you do in Florida?" she asked, sounding curious but not as though she were humoring him.

"Fix boats. Fish."

"You already do that here." She let that linger, and she tilted her head again just so before continuing. "You'd quit doing field work for the FBI if a relationship ended, but not for your own mental health?"

"It was purely hypothetical. I wouldn't move because we broke up."

"You should talk to Hannibal about your options when you bring it up," she said. "He might be willing to move closer to you instead of the other way around."

"What's he going to do in Virginia or D.C.?" He shook his head. He couldn't imagine Lecter leaving his strange, patchwork city for anything less than maybe Europe. *Or a jail cell,* the stubborn backbone of Will's personality chimed in. "It makes more sense this way."

"You would know better than I," she said, and that was the end of that.

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He left the appointment at five, in the thick of rush hour, and he relied on his GPS to steer him through Mount Vernon to Roland Park, preoccupied with the struggle to put the specter of knowledge back into some sort of box. It had been easy to rationalize and dismiss a relationship he didn't let himself feel or know, his desperate attempts to pretend to be in it apart notwithstanding. But evidence that some version of him—one he probably invented, and didn't that speak volumes—felt strongly enough about someone to consider uproot himself showed him the breadth of his failure. Will knew the prospect of leaving behind his quiet, isolated life for the severance it was.

Will crawled along I-83 for nearly twenty minutes until he found himself too quickly taking the exit that would bring him to Lecter's house. A few times he thought of texting Lecter to let him know he was on his way, but his hands felt glued to the steering wheel.

He unstuck his hands long enough to turn off the ignition, and in the sudden relative silence he could hear himself breathing, nearly heard the rushing blood that fed his overtaxed brain.

The clock said 5:40 and the windshield fogging up with the heat of his body and breath before Will got himself to leave the Volvo. From that point, the trip to the front door seemed easy enough. It was unlocked when he tried it, so he slipped inside without so much as a creak from the door.

"I'm early," he announced to the hallway, taking off his jacket with jumbled hands. The scar on his arm pulled, and he rubbed at it distractedly. He could smell and hear Lecter—*Hannibal* he reminded himself, or maybe the other Will Graham did, lending it softness he wasn't used to—cooking deeper inside of the house.

The richness of browned butter, something pungent underneath it, and an unfamiliar sweetness that intensified as he came closer to its source. Hannibal was finally revealed around a corner, white dress shirt and blue slacks and an apron cutting black lines into the palette of his clothes with its tied strings. His back was stiffer than usual, which Will had been expecting from the tone of his *especially* impersonal text messages.

He slid into a stool to watch him cook, his hands sweeping across the counter as he did. "What are you making?" he asked in a low voice that acknowledged Hannibal's silence and standoffishness but did not confront it.

"Roasted grapes with Valdeón and walnuts, at the moment."

"Appetizer?" Will guessed, ignoring the part of him, or version of him, that was winding up with anxiety over such a distant tone.

He had a few guesses as to why Hannibal was so obviously and quietly furious, and in preparation, he took another Tums to allay his uneasy stomach, as well as to give him something to do. He wriggled one out of the roll, and flakes of foil came with it.

"Yes."

He sighed around the Tums, pushing it against his cheek to be heard clearly. "Are you going to talk to me, or should I expect all of dinner to be this frosty?"

Hannibal stopped his movements near the stove, and Will heard the clatter of him setting down a knife. He braced both of his fists against the counter, and from what Will could see, stared down at whatever was set in front of him.

"I hoped to enjoy a good meal before this conversation, but perhaps it's best to have it done with."

In quick succession, he pushed away what Will then saw was a cutting board and a thick, uneven slab of cheese, flicked a knob on his stove to turn it off, and took a dish towel slung over his shoulder from its perch and folded it with quick, efficient hands. When he turned around, Will saw that his face was set in blankness, the kind that came with determination.

Will said nothing, quietly snapping the Tums into half-dissolved pieces. Hannibal, ever considerate as a host, filled a glass with water from the fridge and set it in front of Will. He took a moment longer to pour one for himself, then leaned against the metal island and observed Will steadily.

"I received a call from Alana Bloom this morning," he said, stopping to take a gulp of water. Will hadn't touched his yet, and didn't relish the idea of adding cold water to his mint-flavored mouth. "She told me that Abigail Hobbs made an escape attempt, and that she's been in a near manic state since your visit. Alana says she's convinced the FBI will prosecute her for involvement in her father's crimes."

He squeezed his eyes shut in a grimace for a moment. "That's unfortunate," Will said. Hannibal only continued to observe him and take another long drink from his water, the only outward sign of his distress. Distantly, the Will Graham he was supposed to be pounded unhappily at Will's rigidly erected forts. "The last thing I wanted was to upset her."

"I warned you that further contact with Abigail would be detrimental."

"I know, I know you you did," Will said, quiet and contrite as he could stand to sound. "But Alana said—"

"I'm well aware Alana asked you to visit Abigail." Hannibal's voice, which had earlier been so bland as to suggest their conversation was about nothing more personal than the weather, now held the first sign of brittleness. "What I cannot fathom is why you agreed."

Will pinched the bridge of his nose, bumping his glasses askew before taking them off and tucking them away in his pocket. "I thought I owed her the courtesy. I didn't mean for it to get out of hand."

"You cannot still think you owe Abigail Hobbs for ridding the world of a murderer, even if it was her father."

"I owe her answers," Will corrected him. "I'd do the same for any victim in her circumstance."

"She is not 'any victim.'" Hannibal set his glass of water down with a thunk, both of his hands coming to grip the edge of the island as if he needed bolstering for the conversation. It was

unnerving to see him so upset, and something about the way he only barely held himself in check made it even worse. "You changed your mind about her culpability, you also agreed she was only helping Lounds dig up material, and then you decided to throw good sense to the wind and visit her? Because Alana Bloom asked you?"

The sound of Alana's name was like the striking of a match. Will couldn't call it; it might have been jealousy, or resentment, or pure incredulity, but whatever the case, Hannibal had to work harder to keep himself steady, knuckles turning white as he tightened his grip on the island's edge, veins pushing into sharp relief under his skin.

"It wasn't *because* Alana asked," he said, and his natural defenses were rising, exhausting guilt from his effect on Abigail's stability, the kneejerk response to being scolded like a naughty child—and knowing that Hannibal was right in his prediction of the outcome, even if he had little right to dictate Will's relationships. His raised his voice from its placation to something with sharp edges. "I don't appreciate the insinuati—"

"You lied to me."

He said it at a conversational volume, but the accusation in the words seemed to boom throughout the kitchen, bouncing off of the well-oiled cabinets, ringing in his—and he suspected Hannibal's—ears. Will shut his mouth.

It was as if he'd shouted. Hannibal looked shamefaced for a moment, breaking his study of Will to glance off into the middle distance, and his profile settled back into neutrality as Will watched.

"I do not want to do this in here," he said. He untied his apron and tossed it onto the island.

Will pushed himself to standing and then into motion, following Hannibal out of the kitchen —*of course he can't stand to fight in here, it's his sanctuary*—and into a sitting room Will had spent little time in before. His body felt like it was powered by instinct alone, like he was floating rather than expending energy with each step. His heart pounded like it was trying to break free of his ribcage or crawl up his throat. Will did not want to have this conversation; he knew he was ill-equipped for it as himself, but he did not want to break open the precarious lock on the containment of his other self. Now that he had a better understanding, the other Will Graham felt closer, and the closeness—the ease at which Will thought he could become him—was terrifying.

Hannibal did not sit down, and so Will was forced to remain standing on numb legs.

Will broke the silence, if only to drown out the noise in his head. "Would you have preferred I told you first? Or did you want to hear me say that you were right, that visiting her was disastrous?"

"I see no value in my being right. I would *prefer* if you kept your promises to me. You and I agreed not to visit Abigail Hobbs, to leave her in peace. If you changed your mind, I would have you come to me rather than going behind my back and giving excuses that insult the both of us."

"Christ, that's not what happened," Will started, but the hollow, stricken feeling washed over him like a wave of nausea. *I fucked up. Bad.* He didn't know they'd made some strange *pact* to avoid Abigail Hobbs—Hannibal must have recognized the danger lurking in both of them, the desire to insinuate themselves as fucked-up surrogate fathers, and done his best to head it off—and he'd handled the whole thing wrong because of his lack. "I didn't set out trying to deceive you or go behind your back. That was never my intention."

"Your word means something to me, Will. Or it did." He tilted his head at Will, and he flashed to Bedelia, her bird's neck, bird of prey spotting a weakness, and then seemed to deliberate something, shutters coming up over his eyes. "I demanded honesty as your psychiatrist. You gave it to me then. I assumed you'd extend me that same honesty as your partner, but you have been lying to me. Habitually."

Stone-cold panic replaced his mounting anxiety. "I've been lying—because I fucked up and didn't tell you immediately, I've been *habitually lying*?" He was struggling to hold on to his thoughts, his words, trying to keep parts of the truly infuriated and distressed version of Will Graham, *distressed over seeing his boyfriend so goddamn betrayed, like a kicked dog*, buried somewhere in his psyche from escaping and prostrating himself in apology.

"I don't know why you've been lying. Rest assured that the innermost workings of your mind are still an enigma to me," *bitterness, there, nearly mockery, because I'm untouchable to him, the only mystery he can't solve, and when that isn't captivating, it's infuriating*, "but as someone who knows you as well as anyone can, it is obvious."

"I don't believe this." Will rubbed a shaky hand across his mouth, muffling a bitter, disbelieving chuckle that sounded as fake as it felt, and the parched skin of his lips felt rubbed raw by the brief touch. His whole body was on the verge of shaking, but he kept it confined to his hands as best he could. *Concentrate. Fight back. You're Will Graham, you're in Baltimore, Maryland, and you're on the verge of being discovered for the fake you are. And they'll cart you off to Chilton's House of Horrors if you tell them you think you're going fucking crazy, that this is all a dream. Even in a dream, you couldn't stand the sight of Chilton's face, could you?*

No. You're in Baltimore, Maryland, and you're on the verge of losing the one relationship you're capable of having. The person you're willing to uproot yourself for. Fight ***back.***

"If you want to end our relationship, you need only say so."

It was as if his joints liquefied, like Hannibal had spoken some triggering phrase and set off a programmed reaction; Will tried to take a step toward the couch, to cushion or perhaps try and disguise the fall he knew he was coming, but in the end he crumpled like a marionette, its cut strings tangled in its limbs. He banged his arm in a way he knew was painful on the way down, but it didn't yet hurt.

"*Will*!"

His vision was static on an old television, black around the edges, but he hadn't fainted. He was aware enough to feel Hannibal's arms come around him, trying to maneuver him into a

sitting position from his heap on the floor. He was kneeling, and his kneecaps pushed into Will's side.

"I'm all right," he said, breathlessly, muzzily, Hannibal's warm palm cupping his neck, smoothing over his face, then checking his pulse with two fingers. "I can get up."

"No," Hannibal said, clipped and no-nonsense, and Will heard a sliver of that animal panic he'd felt earlier echo in his voice. It made Will's unsteady pulse kick up a few notches. "Don't move."

"It's not a seizure," he said, and he willed his body to move, but it felt like a limp, distant thing, heavy as he was drawn against Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal did not answer. Will closed his eyes and swallowed, let the dizzy, empty feeling in his head have its way with him, shivering every now and then as Hannibal's gentle but determined hands found a new part of him to touch and assess.

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Eventually Hannibal lifted him onto the couch. Will arranged himself in a position aping normalcy, though it was difficult to keep his head up.

At first Hannibal hovered, but then he disappeared for long moments, and Will knew he made frequent trips from the kitchen to the doorway of the sitting room to look in and track Will's progress. Or his consciousness. When he heard the distant whistle of a tea kettle, it sounded like some kind of siren.

Will regarded the steaming mug Hannibal placed on the coffee table in front of him, but his body still wasn't cooperating enough to lift it to his mouth and sip. "Thank you," he managed.

"Drink." Hannibal sat at the furthest end of the couch. "The broth has a few minutes yet."

"I don't need broth," Will said, remembering the tepid, salty mixture Barney slid through his meal carrier, that he stood by to watch Will eat painstaking spoonfuls of until he considered it sufficient and retrieved the mostly empty bowl. He nearly gagged remembering its strange greasiness.

"Would you prefer a trip to the emergency room?"

"Don't—" His breath caught like a hiccup, trying to find a rhythm to bring enough oxygen to his brain. "Don't be ridiculous. The encephalitis is gone; I just had a bad spell."

"Stop," Hannibal said firmly. "I am not as easy to placate as Jack, nor am I simple-minded. You fainted from hunger."

It was perhaps a sign of Will's discombobulation that his only argument was, "I didn't faint."

Hannibal ignored him again and put a hand to Will's forehead that started out tense but loosened, he noticed, out of some aroused protective instinct. If he'd had the wherewithal, he

would have made an effort to look even more pathetic. Anything to stave off the questions he knew were coming.

"The tea is very mild. A few sips should help settle your stomach," he said pointedly, before disappearing again to finish the damn broth.

By the time Hannibal returned with a large white bowl, a hand towel draped over his arm and a spoon in one fist, Will had wrapped trembling palms around the mug and was blowing across the surface of the tea. A taste had revealed it to be an unfamiliar blend, though pleasant, and he wondered if Hannibal made it for him often.

Without asking or checking on his progress, Hannibal pried the tea from his grasp and settled the bowl into it instead. Will was relieved; he'd assumed Hannibal might try something as asinine as feeding him like a petulant child, directing the spoon himself. The bowl was on the hot side, but there was enough of it left unfilled for him to shape his grip around the cooler spots.

As much as it galled him, he didn't think he could eat one-handed. "I'm going to spill all over your five thousand dollar carpet," he muttered, aware that his own shaking was causing waves in the goldish broth, little flakes of pepper and other spices floating on top. The smell was objectively tantalizing, but the part of Will's brain that wanted things had been shut off indefinitely.

"You're far more likely to stain the couch," Hannibal said, and he took the bowl from him, holding it out like an offering at close range, and handed him the spoon instead. "I have others in storage."

He allowed Will to suffer through the indignity of gripping the spoon in his right hand and using left to steady it, and Will's throat managed not to close through three careful spoonfuls of rich broth. It was easy not to make eye contact like this, hunched over and feeding himself like an invalid.

"How long have you been going without meals?"

Will jerked his head in a version of a shrug and regretted it. "Since Budge," he answered, leaning further over the bowl. There was no point in making a production out of poor excuses; Hannibal was primed to attack anything he felt was a lie, and he'd no doubt noticed the weight loss when he'd hoisted Will onto the couch.

"Why?"

"Stress."

Hannibal sighed soundlessly, the bowl moving a tiny bit as he did. Will took another spoonful of broth, a tiny trickle of it escaping the corner of his mouth and sliding down into the bristles of his stubble. He cleaned it by rubbing his chin against his shirt-covered shoulder. "You should have come to me."

Will said nothing. The spoon clicked against the side of the bowl as he attempted a shaky stir. The column of his throat felt unnaturally warm inside, a path that led all the way to his stomach. He told himself it was coffee, and that helped.

"Did you discuss this with Bedelia, at least?"

He slurped the spoonful of soup he told himself would be the last and sat back, shaking his head. "Give me a minute," he said. He slumped against the couch, closing his eyes and taking in a deep breath.

Will heard Hannibal set down the bowl and felt him retrieve the spoon from his lax grip. The cushion Will was on dipped as Hannibal changed positions, close enough to touch, though no part of them actually did. He stayed close and steady, his breathing like a metronome Will could follow, and he didn't try to shovel more of the broth down his gullet.

"Did you have difficulties with food before you captured Budge?" His voice was slipping back to something distant and nearly clinical, though Will could still hear the hollow tone of exhaustion in it.

"Sometimes I forgot to eat. Or sleep." Will directed all of it to the ceiling, which did not have intelligent eyes to avoid. "But not like this."

"You're actively avoiding meals. A spell like the one you had does not come out of nowhere. Days or weeks of malnutrition—" He was gaining momentum, and Will cut him off.

"I know all of this, you know all of this." Will lifted his head, and it felt like his brain thudded around in his skull as he did. It took every bit of the strength he'd earned since being sat on the couch and forcing down the broth to make eye contact, but oddly, it seemed as though his weariness helped. It wiped out many of the things he normally had to work to conceal. "You know I'm going to fix this, so for now can we not—do this?"

"I cannot flip a switch to stop caring about you. And I do not *know* anything. By rights you should be under someone's care." He swept a hand over the lower half of his face.

Will groaned. "You're a medical doctor, right, which means you've got experience with this sort of thing. I'm under your care. I'm going to be fine," he said.

Hannibal looked at him, mouth an unhappy line that dragged down the rest of his face until he looked even more tired. "Finish your broth," he finally said, leaning forward to pull it from its place on the coffee table. "I'll check your vitals, and in the morning we're going to see my personal physician."

Will nodded, grasping for the spoon, not willing to push his luck or wanting to expend the energy to craft another argument. The snide voice in the back of his head, half-Chilton and half-him, reminded him that he was a full-fledged basket case and was lucky Hannibal hadn't immediately carted him off to Johns Hopkins. They both knew he should have.

*There's no guarantee he won't. Or that his personal physician won't see the need for a seventy-two hour hold, just to be **safe**. What's another feeding tube in the name of safety,*

right, Graham?

And when they peel off your clothes for your physical and stick you in scrubs, they're going to notice the fucking bullet hole in your arm, and that's going to be awfully hard to explain. Maybe he'll notice it himself, when he's taking care of you tonight like a good boyfriend should. Maybe he'll realize that you can't stand to touch him, lying there in bed, stiff as a corpse.

Numbed with more panic, Will glanced down at the broth and noted the lack of steam. A shudder chased itself down his spine.

"Um, could you heat it up?" he asked. "I do better when it's hot."

Hannibal barely paused. "Would you prefer something else?"

"Yeah, actually," Will said, the sheepish smile on his face trembling at the corners. He hoped Hannibal put it down to embarrassment, to the shame he should have felt over being found out for the mess he was, and not for the sudden, sickening adrenalin of his flight response. He felt like the silence before the starting gun. "Toast?"

Hannibal got up to make it, and Will spent thirty seconds desperately trying to remember where he'd put his keys—*jacket pocket, hung up in the entryway*—and debating the merits of slipping out in his socks versus still wearing his shoes. But Hannibal had hearing to match his nearly preternatural nose, and Will knew he'd get as far as his car in his current state before being found out—and dragged straight to the hospital.

Ultimately he shelved his poorly-devised escape plan, at least for that moment; it would be easier in the dead of night, once Hannibal was asleep. It still didn't solve the problem of being forced to withstand a doctor's scrutiny, or the threat of intimacy that loomed huge in his mind over the idea of sharing a bed, but if Will was going to be sent kicking and screaming back to a hospital, as all logic suggested he would be, he'd spend his last few hours with his dogs, away from the constant burden of having to pretend.

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The discovery of his scar was narrowly avoided when Hannibal checked his blood pressure, but overall he escaped questions that would lead them down a road he couldn't come back from. He ate a piece of toast and four spoonfuls of some incredibly thick and sour-tasting yogurt Hannibal pulled from his fridge. Will leaned against the counter and watching him tidy up from their aborted dinner, everything packed away into matching Tupperware.

Eventually Hannibal deemed him fed enough. Will was glad, because the yogurt made everything else want to come up in a hurry.

All of his worry over sharing such close quarters was for naught; both of them dressed in pajamas, Will tired but kept alert by his body's—his mind's—clawing desire for freedom, Hannibal did not touch him or force another conversation Will was ill-equipped to navigate. He seemed as tired as Will, if such a thing were possible, asking him simple questions in short, murmured phrases.

Will felt a tendril of sorrow unfurl in his chest when the two of them were finally in bed together, side by side, the dip of blankets between the shapes of their bodies a tangible line neither of them crossed. He didn't know if it was from himself, the other Will Graham buried inside of him, or a shadow of Hannibal's own pain.

"I'll be all right," he said, a clumsy assurance at best, and Hannibal turned his head to look at him, propped up by thick pillows, hair falling into his eyes. The lamp on Hannibal's side of the bed lent the whole thing a blurry glow, a softness Hannibal's rawboned face didn't naturally have.

He offered his own assurance, a smile that pulled at only the right side of his mouth. "I know. I'm only upset that I couldn't spare you from this. After the monsters you've slain, you shouldn't have to battle another."

"I'm a grown man, and I'm not your patient anymore; it isn't your responsibility to spare me from anything."

"Who are we if we don't long to save others from suffering," Hannibal said. His eyeline went to Will's mouth, and his expression turned thoughtful. Will steeled himself for the soft press of a kiss he knew might come, knowing the fracturing self within him couldn't withstand much tenderness, and though he showed no external trepidation, Hannibal did not lean forward after all. "I'll get the light."

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"Good boy."

For all of Will's longing for their familiar company, the dogs did not share his enthusiasm. To them, the best part of his return—at just past three in the morning, wearing his jacket over pajamas with bare feet—was being dished up a late meal and being thrown a few half-deflated tennis balls. Only Winston and Thaddeus kept close while the others sacked out on the floor or gnawed on things Will was too preoccupied to check were actual bones.

Winston sat his head on Will's knee, and Will sighed a shaky exhale, fingers buried in Winston's ruff too tightly to be affectionate. He felt desperate and untethered, and the knowledge that at best Hannibal would arrive in a few hours and that at worse he'd bring the cavalry refused to leave him alone.

"Maybe he'll stick me somewhere nice, huh?" he said, and Winston's ears perked. Thaddeus scooted closer on the bed, happy he was allowed on it with him for once. Sleeping with dogs was a precarious proposition, as all eight of them tended to pile up on him in the night, but he'd welcome being smothered right then. At the moment, he only shared the bed with two of them and his laptop.

Said laptop was where he'd left it that morning, after retrieving it from the floor and making sure it wasn't broken. It wasn't, though it now had some scuffing at one of the corners. It looked so innocuous, just a piece of pain in the ass machinery he used primarily for work and occasionally in paltry attempts to allay boredom that never really worked. He'd slept with it near him or even on the bed for the past few nights—if *sleeping* was indeed what he did. In

contrast to his bare mattress and scratchy, hospital-issue blankets, sleeping on a mediocre double bed with a laptop felt like lying in his coffers.

When he opened the lid, he noted a new creaking in the hinges that hadn't been there before he'd had his little tantrum. It was still on, connected to the power cord, and he knew if he typed in his password, he'd be staring at the same folder full of recordings. There were only a handful left, Will remembered, and in all of his long hours trying to project himself into them, with little success, to really understand the Will Graham he was faking his way through being, he still hadn't figured out where it happened. Where it was exactly that Hannibal's offer of unorthodox friendship changed. Where Will decided to go along with it.

He cast a glance to the curtained windows near his bed. It was still night-dark outside, nearly purple. His bottle of Black Bush was still on his nightstand, catching a glare from the neon numbers on his clock.

Winston repositioned himself when Will reached for the bottle, eschewing a glass, and pulled his laptop closer.

Will weighed his options, then how long it would take Hannibal to drive to Wolf Trap.

He clicked the last file, also the shortest of the batch, and took a long swig that burned painfully the whole way down.

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"It's good to see you up and about," Hannibal said, once the ritual of the session's beginning was over and the taping was well under way.

"We had lunch together two days ago," Will pointed out, though from his voice it was clear they were sharing some secret joke. "And I haven't been an invalid in a whole four."

"I meant in the world," Hannibal said, equally light. "Seeing you outside the walls of a hospital is a refreshing experience."

"It is nice to be in my own clothes again," Will admitted.

"I can imagine. It's been many years since I was last hospitalized, but wearing my own clothing and preparing my own meals felt like luxuries after a few days of being a patient." Will didn't reply, and there was the sound of papers being tapped against the desk. "And the dogs?"

"They're fine. Better than. I sat on the porch and threw a few balls for a while, wore them out so they wouldn't try and knock me over out of excitement." Will cleared his throat. "Thank you again for watching them for me."

"It was nothing, only a simple courtesy between friends."

"Well, if you ever have—" Will chuckled at whatever thought occurred to him "—an exotic bird that needs looking after, I'll be happy to repay the favor."

"I'm not keeping score, Will." He crossed his legs, the silk material whispering with the movement. They were seated facing each other, then, the recorder equidistant between them. Not too much space, not like when they started. Hannibal orchestrated a careful inching of the gap over many sessions, but now he'd demonstrably closed the space between them. Like a challenge, maybe – but with confidence that it would be met with no resistance.

"Good, because I'm too far behind to dream of catching up."

"Now that you are officially well and our conversations can continue uninterrupted by the nursing staff, what would you like to talk about?"

For whatever reason, Will laughed again. It was a discomfited sound, though not strictly nervous. "Umm, I don't know. I think we've got a lot to talk about."

"You need only find a place to begin."

"Oh, sure, make it sound simple." Hannibal waited him out, through his silent pensiveness and his languid sigh. "You, uh, you said earlier that it was a courtesy between friends."

"I did." Hannibal's tone conveyed no confusion, but it was too steady to be entirely ignorant of where Will was going, albeit haltingly.

"Is that what we are? Really?"

This time, Hannibal was cautious. His cadence was like something unspooling. "I hope so, yes. If our association over the last few weeks has been strictly professional in your view, then I would find that disappointing."

"See, that's the thing. I'm not—I'm not questioning if you're my friend, I know that you are, and a good one." A heavy exhale, bolstering. "But I just spent nearly two weeks with nothing to do but think, and that kind of time is … edifying."

"I'm not sure I catch your meaning," he said, as measured as ever.

"Dr. Lecter," Will shifted and leaned forward, closer to the recorder. "Do you know how many times Alana visited me in the hospital? Four times. Which was generous of her. She's an extremely busy woman, and to take time out of her day to visit a sick friend is more than a gesture, it's a sacrifice. But you visited me nearly every day. You ran interference with Jack. You brought me lunches and dinners and books. You took care of my dogs. And I have a hard time believing your schedule is any less full than Alana's."

"I had the benefit of living in the same city where you convalesced."

"You recommended that hospital."

"After you had an episode in the middle of our session, yes, I thought it best to find you the best treatment I could. Will, I'm still not certain—"

"It took me a while to figure it out. I should have, when you offered to take the dogs. But I didn't, probably because my brain was cooking and I was—distracted. I'd like to say you're

hard to read, but you're not."

"Will."

There was a long, significant silence, and something in it affected Will. His voice was barely at a conversational volume when he resumed speaking. "Both of us are above this kind of pretense, Dr. Lecter. You should have told me you were attracted to me."

To his credit, Hannibal did not linger in his own pause. "That is a box best left unopened, I think. It's inappropriate, considering what we do here."

Will snorted a laugh. "That's convenient bullshit. Or do you hold a bedside vigil for all your patients?" His tone turned biting, but it was without heat. Having to pin Hannibal down in the truth was frustrating him, leeching the flippancy Will might have otherwise tried to project. He changed tack next. "You had to have known I'd figure it out. Why didn't you preempt it?"

"I had thought it a wasted exercise. Aside from being unethical, it was my understanding that —" For the first time, Will got the sense of how much he'd pushed Hannibal out of his comfort zone. He didn't think Will was going to call him out, or at least not point-blank like this. "I thought that if your inclinations lie with anyone, they would be with Alana Bloom."

Will stood up then, in one frustrated push of motion. He didn't pace, but he backed up a few feet from Hannibal, as if nearness were the cause of his confusion and he could remove himself from it. "So you, what, assumed I was too straight to care if you were romantically interested in me?"

"Aren't you?"

"Jesus. I don't—you owed it to our friendship to tell me. It shouldn't have been a goddamn surprise."

"I'm sorry if I've upset you, truly. Either with my feelings or by doing you the disservice of not being honest about them."

"Do I look upset?" Will snapped. "I'm thinking."

Hannibal let him think. He did get up from his seat to put them on a level playing field, and out of some strange manners Will wasn't familiar with, but he kept the distance between them while Will stewed.

Finally, more of it bubbled out of him. "I don't care that you're attracted to me, but the level of investment you've shown goes beyond just attraction or just friendship. That's what I—I don't ***mind*** *that either. I just find it ridiculous that I only figured it out when Jack gave me a weird look one day. After you left, he asked me if I was going to see another therapist, and I laughed at him. But then I looked at your behavior, and nothing else made sense."*

"You're right, of course. My regard for you is more than that of a friend," Hannibal admitted quietly, as though it were a grave confession or an apology. "I was self-indulgent these last

few weeks. It's no shock that Jack picked up on it."

"He does run the BAU," Will muttered.

"You are his biggest blind spot, and knowing that, I made assumptions. I apologize again—"

"Stop apologizing. Apology accepted, all right? Although I'm pretty sure Jack isn't going to let us around each other without a chaperone anymore," Will said, some of his calmness returning to him. The dark amusement in his voice was a signal to Hannibal to relax in kind, and a curiosity of its own; he hadn't yet clarified the bounds or the future of their relationship, and that hung heavy over both of them.

"Unfortunately, the box being now opened means that my treating you is a conflict of interest."

"Treating me?" Will echoed disbelievingly. "You haven't been treating me in any official capacity. It's off the books. You said yourself that we just have conversations."

"Then I am not comfortable having conversations with this between us, Will, I'm sorry."

"You're assuming I give a flying fuck what Jack thinks."

"Even if Jack did not suspect—"

"Suspect what? That you have feelings for me? That isn't his business. It's ***barely*** *his business if we're actually sleeping together."*

"If we were sleeping together, my license would be revoked," Hannibal said, a bit of heat in his voice; Will jumping down his throat with unexpected arguments was getting old.

"Then I'll take the damn referral to someone else."

Hannibal halted a moment while the implications of that sunk in. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your mind works as similar to mine as any on earth, Hannibal." The soft fall of footsteps, Will's still irritated breathing. "What do you see?"

In the moments that followed, both of them moved closer. Hannibal's breathing wasn't picked up by the recorder, but Will's still was, and it deepened and slowed to match a partner's.

"Will," Hannibal said again, this time with brand new inflection a little like awe.

"I make no promises," Will said wryly, a grimness undercutting it that showed how truly he meant it. "I'm not great relationship material, and I don't know how attracted I am to men," he swallowed, showing them both how he nearly said 'to you.' "But I'm interested," he continued, low enough that Hannibal had to have been mere inches away now. Then Will gave an edgy huff of a laugh. "Provided you're actually able to advance your courtship methods past the nineteenth century."

"I'm not noble enough to tell you that 'interested' is shaky ground on which to build," Hannibal said.

"I know you're not noble. I can see the way you look at me."

The next sound was Will's quick inhale through his nose, and the heavy sigh of touch after a long period without. They must have been standing close to the recorder, because the soft, slick noises between them were audible. It started slow, but Will's breathing turned labored, and the sound of hands sweeping across someone's shirt followed.

When Will spoke again, close to a minute later, his voice pitched rough. "I'm having less concerns about the attracted to men thing after that."

"'No promises,' I recall," Hannibal said, the slurred sound of lips too close to skin.

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Will drifted for a while, somewhere close to sleep between the numbing of the whiskey and his total exhaustion, mental and physical alike. The session had continued, but Will had not heard it, an overflowing pool of knowledge and the ache of his empathy refusing to let anything else in. It took a while for his surroundings to come back.

He had twenty minutes to pet Winston and stare at his ceiling before he heard the crunch of tires over gravel. He didn't need to look at the clock to know that only a few hours at most had gone by; his bedroom was still dark, though in the borderland between winter and spring, mornings were slow to brighten with dawn.

The sound of Hannibal's—he hoped it was Hannibal's—car door slamming closed was the impetus he needed to sit up and pilot himself to standing. He ran a stiff hand under his eyes to make sure he hadn't been crying, relieved to find it dry and without the tackiness of salt. He still had on the pajamas Hannibal had given him, so all he did was pad from the bed to the couch to wait, flicking on a light as he went.

A few of the dogs roused themselves from sleep and wandered over to investigate the sounds, but they knew the distinct notes of Hannibal's presence, so most stayed where they were, to sleepy to care about company.

Will figured Hannibal had a key, and he was right. He came through the door, exhaling a plume of vapor from the cold pre-dawn. He'd barely bothered to dress, throwing some coat over an outfit hastily picked for warmth. His hair was falling into his eyes, and Will managed to withstand his expression for a few seconds. Clearly furious, but with a stark, open fear that gnawed at Will's guilt until it hurt.

He had an excuse prepared, but it fell flat before he shaped it in his mouth. "I'm sorry I scared you," was all he managed, and honestly.

"What is so wrong that you had to steal away in the night?" Hannibal said, and his mouth drew into a tight, angry line. He'd been vacillating between terror and anger the entire ride to Wolf Trap, Will knew, sensing his emotions beating at the doors of his control.

"I couldn't sleep. I was going to come back in the morning." Thelonious was the only dog oblivious enough to walk in the space separating them, rubbing along Hannibal's leg in hello until the sight of a kibble-filled bowl distracted him.

"I don't believe you. I think you would stay here until something forced you out."

"Hannibal –"

"I am used to your unpredictability, Will, and I know what it looks like. This is something else. You have been lying, paranoid, and avoidant for a week. You cannot stand to touch me, and while at first I attributed that to your disordered eating and attempts to conceal it, I think that in itself is a symptom of something bigger." Each word was tightly and precisely said, as though keeping a leash on his temper and helplessness meant Will could not feel them keenly anyway. "You look at me like I am a stranger—the last time we had sex was a week ago, *before* Budge. You abruptly changed your mind about Abigail and betrayed your promise to me. You skipped a session with Bedelia, despite it violating a condition of your return to work. Please, *tell me*, what is wrong?"

Will's hollow, crackling laugh did not do much more than pull Hannibal's eyebrows together in concern. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you," he said, and the truth of it put hysteria in his voice that rose with every syllable, clearly heard.

"I would believe anything at this point. It is as though you went to sleep and woke up a different person." Will's laughter filled the space around them, louder that time, and he felt like it was being pulled out of him. He recognized the signs of dissociation and tried to ground himself in the moment, but every time he did, all he could think was *this isn't real*.

What's the point of pretending to be anything other than crazy? He doesn't buy your pitiful fucking charade anyway.

"I do not accept that Budge's personality has swallowed you whole, and you were underweight even the night you caught him—so *what is it*?" Hannibal demanded.

"*You're not real*," Will shouted at him, suddenly not on the couch anymore, dazed with the quick, unexpected movement. He swayed on his feet for a moment, and he expected the regretful realization that he couldn't take it back to crest over him, but it never did. Instead, he almost wanted to scream it again.

It only took Hannibal a few seconds to assess how clearly unstable Will had become, or appeared to have become, and he shut down the human part of him in favor of the doctor, the psychiatrist. There was almost no sign of the frantic man Will had seen moments before, only clinical calmness. "Do you believe you're dreaming right now?"

Will made his way to the living room window on unsteady feet. Looking at Hannibal in that detached mode was like looking at Lecter, and it was unbearable. He spoke to the pane of glass, his breath fogging up what little glint of his reflection there was. "Yes. Although mostly it's that I can't tell if I'm dreaming or awake, if this is some sick joke I'm playing on *myself*, but I woke up in your fucking bed, and you're – you're not you." He grimaced a funhouse version of a smile, teeth bared. "You're so obviously not you. You *care* about me,

you're not pretending to." His breath was coming shorter, like he was chasing after it. "You love me, don't you, Dr. Lecter? I can see it all over you, you reek of it."

"Will," he said, and Will heard the weakness in his voice, how thoroughly scared he was, "if you're having trouble differentiating between reality and dreams, I think we may need to consider that the encephalitis was not completely eradicated."

His hands slammed down onto the sill, and he saw the messy corona of his curls move as he frantically shook his head. Staring at an obscured, dim reflection of himself did not make him feel any more stable, so he turned around again. "I'm dreaming. I've made up this fucked up fantasyland where you make me soup and I'm selling my house to move closer to you."

Hannibal made a noise, severing the last of his hold on whatever pretense of detachment he was trying for.

"I found that out today." Will dragged his gaze across the floor, dog hair and an old, worn rug, to Hannibal's matte black shoes, and then up his legs to his torso, stopping only at his chin, vision blurring as he sank into feeling as his primary sense and babbled out whatever floated to the surface. "Out of all the people on earth, it's *you* that I'd want to touch me, and I bet you're so good at it, too, I bet you give Will Graham *exactly* what he never knew he wanted," he said.

He could see it, the slow, painfully awkward progression of a relationship, Hannibal gentling him like a fucking spooked horse. Touch-starved Will Graham, basking in the attention of someone who wanted his fucked up mind and his body together, not one or the other, *I'm having less concerns about the attracted to men thing after that, the last time we had sex was a week ago, the feel of a man on top of him, sharp shoulder blades and corded muscles and the burn of beard and his cock for the first time, the condoms in the drawer they'd agreed to stop using, goddamnit, Graham, you really read that one wrong—*

"*WILL*."

Whatever had been unleashed like a snapping band in him allowed him to look at Hannibal's face, crumpled with fear and love until it was like a rictus contortion. His heart pounded in his chest in sympathy, *look what you did*, the immediate, stomach-churning urge to make that expression go away.

"I can prove it, that's the thing." Hannibal started to speak, but Will began to struggle out of his shirt, hands too uncoordinated to bother with the buttons on it, simply yanking it up over his head.

He stood there, far too thin, too thin to have skipped just a week's worth of meals. And on his arm was a freshly-healed bullet wound, too neatly sewn to be fake. Will knew what he looked like, bony and pale, chest heaving, and some part of him would have burned in shame if another were not becoming faint with relief.

At first, Hannibal looked confused, his features nearly serene with it, until he came closer and touched Will's flesh with a sudden iron grip. He pushed at the scar, feeling the density of the tissue, ascertaining that it was real. Improbably real.

White-faced, dropping his hand away, he asked Will, "Who are you?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long! Writer's block and work deadlines kept me from making progress.

I had a lot of excellent and unexpected help during the ~~somewhat torturous~~ process of writing this chapter. First off, thanks to ac_123 for providing crucial information on Baltimore/its various neighborhoods; they're a kick-ass author and send back thoughtful emails when all I do is capslock at them. Secondly, thanks to it's in the water for being an amazing, engaging sounding board for this chapter when there was absolutely no reason to.

Thanks to my usual suspects for their contributions (especially Randstad, you helped me navigate dumbo romance things). Y'all all lovely.

And for a further note on the disordered eating content; a lot of that comes directly from Thomas Harris: *Garmon Evans, a paraprofessional formerly employed at Bethesda Naval Hospital, said Graham was admitted to the psychiatric wing soon after he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs, the "Minnesota Shrike." Graham shot Hobbs to death in 1975, ending Hobbs's eight-month reign of terror in Minneapolis.*

Evans said Graham was withdrawn and refused to eat or speak during the first weeks of his stay. 'Red Dragon,' 1981.

I think there's a firm basis in canon to suggest that Will Graham has troubles with eating when traumatized, although obviously in the TV canon and in this fic, he's committed under different circumstances. I hesitated over writing a similar situation, but I think -- once we get further into the fic, perhaps even in the next chapter -- the rest of my reasoning for writing Will's near-complete aversion to food will become clearer. But rest assured I did not decide to write this without giving it some careful thought first.

Also, pretty sure we're not getting any Barney next season (damn you, MGM), but whatever, Barney is the nurse/orderly of my heart.

A hint as to what's coming soon: *Starling raised her head to face him. "You see a lot, Dr. Lecter. I won't deny anything you've said. But here's the question you're answering for me right now, whether you mean to or not: Are you strong enough to point that high-powered perception at yourself? It's hard to face. I've found that out in the last few minutes. How about it? Look at yourself and write down the truth. What more fit or complex subject could you find? Or maybe you're afraid of yourself."* 'The Silence of the Lambs,' 1988.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Warning in this chapter for a mention/thought of vomit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will's childhood was filled with nascent version of the nightmares his adult mind frequented like a favorite bar. His father, on the occasion he was not drunk, wrapped in the impenetrable sleep of the work-worn, or on one of his extended trips to nearby cities, would hear him whimpering on whatever bed Will occupied at the time and wake him up. Will remembered his father's hands curling around his upper arms, steering him to sit upright on the bed—or mattress, or sleeping bag on the floor.

Alka-Seltzer was his father's home remedy for Will's bad dreams, probably the only thing he thought to buy regularly because of his own heartburn. It worked, in its fashion, the bitter bubbles nipping at his lips until they felt numb and Will a little bit more awake. He remembered many nights in half-light, staring at his toes and listening to the hiss of sodium bicarbonate and citric acid dissolving in water, taking care not to spill down the front of his pajamas as he weaved from fading adrenalin.

"Hell, Willy." His father's hands in his hair, a brisk ruffle steeped in exasperation and affection. *"Go back to sleep. You got school in the morning."*

When Hannibal guided Will to his adult bed, no second-hand twin mattress, and set him on the edge of it, shushing anxious dogs in their path, Will was reminded of his father and the bitterness of Alka-Seltzer.

"Just a moment," Hannibal murmured, and Will heard the scrape and rattle of the chair at his desk being dragged over in haste.

He'd sat Will down, Will knew, not out of his usual manners, but because it was evident Will was moments from collapsing on him again. At some point he'd found a blanket relatively free of dog hair and draped it over Will's shoulders, keeping his pale, gaunt torso and the damning scar from view.

Hannibal sat across from him in Will's desk chair, and he did not cross his legs or lean back; he craned forward, hands on his knees. He did not have to prompt Will to talk.

"My name is Will Graham, I'm in Wolf Trap, Virginia, it's some ungodly hour in the morning," Will's throat seemed to squeeze closed, "and five days ago, I went to sleep in the Baltimore State Hospital and woke up in your bed."

"May I ask questions?" Hannibal said.

"Yeah." He shuffled the blanket around him, pulling it tighter to stave off shivers he knew weren't entirely from the chill in the air.

"Who gave you that scar?"

Not 'who shot you.' How polite. "Jack did."

"Why?"

Will allowed the lower half of his face to form a smile, right side of his lips lifting, closed-mouth. "That punchline requires a hell of a lot of setup."

"I have time."

"Time to humor a crazy person?" Will asked, lifting his head, honestly curious. There was next to no reason Hannibal should indulge him, but for the unaccountable scar on his arm. There were even fewer reasons Will should talk to the projections of his own subconscious—a theory that only the most stubborn tendrils of him still clung to—but catharsis was powerful. If only Will could erect a confessional.

"I don't think you're crazy. I'm not humoring you."

"I don't know, Dr. Lecter, I'm the one who just said I went to sleep in a mental hospital and woke up someplace else. Sounds pretty crazy."

"If you are crazy, I'm there alongside you. Please, why did Jack give you that scar?"

Will inhaled heavily through his nose. "He shot me because I was holding a gun on the Hannibal Lecter I know. This is—do you want it all at once, like ripping a bandaid off?"

Hannibal held onto whatever bolstered him and said, "Yes."

"Where I'm from, you're not some," Will gestured with a tired hand, "mild-mannered European eccentric. You manipulated me. You killed—killed Abigail Hobbs and framed me for her murder. For a string of murders."

That hung in the air for a while, and Hannibal's breath came out of him in a long, measured whoosh. Will watched his hands squeeze his knees and then forcibly relax.

"That's not all of it." He didn't ask if Hannibal was sure he wanted to hear the rest, and not out of compassion. The secrets he'd been keeping had turned molten; it was harder to keep them in than to spew them out. "I can't believe I didn't see it sooner, but you are—he's shadows on a wall. The shapes change every time I look. But I noticed it, the second day I was here." Budge's creased brow of confusion, ringing the bell in Will's mind. "A killer Lounds dubbed the Chesapeake Ripper. Imagine my surprise when there was no sign of him here. No Ripper, but the psychiatrist I befriended that killed a string of people to fuck with my head ... well, he's not you, is he?"

"You're sure?" Hannibal asked, his accent very thick.

"That he's the Ripper?" Will shrugged, and the blanket slipped a little. He pushed it back up the slope of his shoulder. "Implicitly."

"No, that I am not the same as him. The Chesapeake Ripper under some other name. How are you so certain I'm not?"

"You're asking how I know you're not a serial killer?" Will laughed, the sound like dread, dry grass crackling in a fire. "If you were the same—" He shook his head. "No, he wouldn't fuck me. It's a good way to forge the connection he wanted, but there's too much opportunity for me to walk in on something I shouldn't see. And I told you, I've seen the way you look at me. He doesn't know how to look at anyone like that."

"I see."

"No, you don't," Will said, startling them both when he raised his head enough to connect their gazes. It only lasted a second, maybe less, catching his breath like a static shock. "*I* barely understand it. You might understand if you saw him."

Hannibal took that with no visible reaction, only allowing it and moving on. "You said he framed you for murder."

"For Abigail Hobbs, for Cassie Boyle, for Marissa Schurr. He used bodies like teaching tools." Will paused, turning his head to give an obvious glance and a jerk of his chin towards his lures, the bright feathers only suggestions of color in the still very dark house. The straight lines of his rods hung on the wall looked, in the muzzy distance, like they might have been bars of a cell. "He hid … evidence from all of the victims in my lures. Pretty ingenious."

"You said—Why did he frame you?"

"You ever get bored, Dr. Lecter?" Will asked, knowing the answer was *yes* and *frequently*. "Imagine how it would be to play with your own pet profiler. Add a little undiagnosed encephalitis, some trauma, and you've got six months of entertainment at least. If I lose at trial, which my lawyers assure me I will, he can come poke at me through the bars like I'm a zoo exhibit."

If Chilton lets him. Will managed to have Lecter banned from visiting him for all of two weeks by pushing at Chilton's proprietary buttons; it was like ruffling the feathers of a peacock. Lecter weaseled his way back in eventually, greeting him yet again with the same placid but self-satisfied, "Hello, Will," and Will had almost asked exactly how many terrible dinners Lecter had to sit through in order to maneuver himself back into Chilton's good graces. The image of Chilton patting him companionably on the back as he stood to leave had been answer enough.

"You're taking this better than I thought you would," Will confided, blinking away the image of the other Lecter staring him down in favor of the tight-lipped version in front of him. "Is it shock?"

"At the moment, I don't know what's capable of shocking me."

Winston nudged Hannibal's pant leg, then sat on his haunches expectantly. Hannibal extended one hand—surgeon's hands, Will remembered when he saw how they didn't shake—and thumbed the softness of his ear. Winston butted up into the cup of his hand, the demand in the gesture absent from his dynamic with Will. *How much time has he spent with my dogs?* Queasiness overtook him. He didn't know if it was the food his body still craved and rejected, or the reminder of how close Hannibal was to the other Will Graham.

"Yeah," Will said, after the silence had gone on long enough to remind him of where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. "You and me both."

"What was he trying to teach you?" Hannibal finally sat back in the chair; it creaked a protest, and Winston settled down and propped his head on Hannibal's shoe.

Will closed his eyes, remembering the flash of wings, the peak of antlers; Hannibal Lecter's first attempt at enlightening him.

He circled the body of Cassie Boyle on a cold, bright morning, and his voice when it slid out of him seemed to come from very far away.

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One thing Will's father never did was make him tea. Coffee once or twice, though Will was usually responsible for that, mixing a mug hot from the microwave with instant if they weren't renting somewhere with a real coffee maker. But Will didn't have anything but sweet tea until he was in his early twenties. It was a taste he liked well enough but didn't seek out.

Will spoke for a long time. His throat felt raw when he finally finished. That was when the offer of tea was broached.

The smell of the loose leaf variety Hannibal found in one of his cupboards was fragrant, earthy, and it was almost mineral in the depth of its taste. Hannibal served it to him without sugar or milk. When he'd assembled it, he kept the mug so close to the edge of the counter it was in danger of falling, strange enough to give Will's fried empathy circuits a surge. Will let the impulse creep over him and then fall away like a wave. Not everything needed to be analyzed.

Once he'd made the tea and given it over, Hannibal said something about letting the dogs stretch their legs, but the edge of his jaw clenched rhythmically and his lips were white with tightness. Will nodded, withstood Hannibal's once-over to reassure himself he'd live through a few minutes on his own. Then he'd found Will a sweater and laid it on the bed beside him, finally giving a sharp whistle to bring the dogs in a sleepy tumble out into the yard. "Call me if you require me, Will," he said, the word infused with all the tenderness of 'Mr. Graham.'

Will felt numb the entire time—twenty minutes by the numbers on his alarm clock—to the point that Hannibal's return didn't prompt more than a tired lift of his head. He blew across the surface of the mug, though the steam had long since dissipated. He didn't bother to put on the sweater.

"Good walk?" he asked.

"The air helped clear my head."

"Two below can have that effect," Will said, well-acquainted with its powers himself. "Dogs accounted for?"

Hannibal nodded. It couldn't be the first time he took them on a twilight hour trip to the yard.

"Do you have any more questions?" Will asked when Hannibal made no attempt to do anything other than stand there, hands buried in his coat pockets. He hadn't asked any while Will spoke of his gradual descent into friendship and illness both, and not when he'd lectured on murders like he was flicking through PowerPoint slides. But Will was too agitated and exhausted to not have left stones unturned; he didn't know what he might have left out. Or what might not have been believed.

"No." Their return to the impossible conversation seemed to have jarred him back to life. "May I sit?"

"You don't have to ask."

He kept his coat on when he sat. "It is in my nature to believe the unbelievable, or at least there is a longing to do so. But that isn't important."

"So you, what, don't think I'm crazy? That you're a hallucination?" He sounded rudely disbelieving to his own ears.

"I don't pretend to know what you are or where you are from. If either of us is dreaming, it is irrelevant. To my knowledge, I'm a person, not a projection. I'm limited by that self-awareness." For all of his easy words, he looked worn by saying them; he leaned forward and rubbed at his temple with the heel of his hand. He did straighten as he said, "I believe I can help you."

Will wanted to laugh, but the idea of help—hope—was such an astonishment that all he could do was swallow until his throat clicked. "How? Help—help me out of here?"

"No. I'm not a mathematician or a physicist; I'm proficient enough to make certain guesses, but I know from experience that any of my theories would be flawed. I may be able to help you with—other information."

"What information?"

"About my counterpart."

"I've spent months profiling your counterpart. I have nothing to do but think. And no offense, Doctor; you might be convinced of your reality, but I'm not. I can't put faith in your insights."

Hannibal regarded him. No one would call him an open book, but it was a marvel how deeply Will could peer into the well of his expression. He nearly leaned forward in the bed to look closer. Resignation of a sort, pain, determination. "Your profile is not complete," he said matter-of-factly. "It's missing key components about the Chesapeake Ripper's modus

operandi. I can provide them." At Will's tilted head, his confusion and intrigue, Hannibal gave a grim smile. "You may doubt the truth of our realities, Will, but I don't, not after hearing you. You said the Ripper takes surgical trophies?"

"Yes," Will said warily, swallowing again.

"In truth he does not. He is a cannibal."

The mug trembled in his hand and nearly crashed to the floor, but Hannibal must have seen the wobble and pried it from his weak fingers before it had a chance to shatter and splash. He placed it on Will's bedside table next to his lamp with a careful tink. Will smelled the night air and aftershave on him, the same he found traces of in his own pillow.

"What?"

Hannibal did not repeat himself. He said only, with a look that took full stock of Will's body, "You suspected."

"I—"

There was no dawning realization, only the familiar snap of a fragment of truth assembling itself into the greater picture. He thought the food and tea sloshing precariously in his stomach might come up again, spill all down the front of him, maybe get on Hannibal's shoes, but he didn't so much as gag. Will swallowed a few times, making sure, his gaze flitting from one object in the room to another, knocking around with the frenzy of a pinball. *Shock now, vomiting later*. He didn't know if it was a mantra or a comfort. *Think*.

Months of it, first rationalized as poor appetite because of the host of meds and antibiotics he was on for the encephalitis, then bullheadedly exerting the only control he had in Chilton's domain, and then what? Will, so convinced of this reality being false that he ignored the hunger pains and the dizziness and the infuriating way it clouded his thinking? Before, even at the height of his sickness and losing time and sanity, he hadn't missed any opportunities to eat when they presented themselves--usually at Lecter's table.

His withering seemed laughably obvious now. Penance for a pound of flesh consumed. Give or take. Will swallowed again until he could do more than suck in and expel labored lungfuls of air.

"I didn't want to—couldn't—see he was the Chesapeake Ripper, so I didn't. Not until I was," Will indicated the room in front of him, Hannibal in front of him, his expression drawn as he watched Will suffer under terrible knowledge. The look someone might give if they hit a deer with their car and had to watch it limp away. "Here."

"I don't imagine he will be easy to pin down as the Ripper, but it seemed odd that no one looked deeper into his pathology."

Hobbs filled our cannibal quota, Will thought, feeling his mouth twist. "We didn't even consider it. I don't think. Christ."

"This could be why you're here, Will," Hannibal said, though with too much carefulness to sound entirely reasonable. If Will had the energy and the coordination, he would have scoffed.

"In somnis veritas?" His voice had nearly stopped quavering.

"If you must call it anything, call it that. We've both learned things tonight. I can help you to learn more." He forestalled any more of Will's objections with an upraised palm and, "And if I am only a projection, is there harm in consulting a part of your own subconscious?" When Will had nothing to say to that, he lowered the hand and went on. "You said we aren't the same, but I think in most respects we are."

"Except for the fact that you don't moonlight as a serial killer."

"Our profession, our house—you seemed familiar with most of the layout. Our more benign interests. Our … attraction to you, despite the difference in its manifestation." He sounded wearied by that, and he'd halted before the word 'attraction'. No better word for it, though. "And I knew at once what he does with his victims, even when you with all of your gifts did not. That is more than coincidental."

"You're offering to profile yourself."

Hannibal shook his head. The barely effective mask he wore to cover his distress was lifting to reveal a new determination that Will found exhausting to look at, but he forced himself to keep listening. If Hannibal could crack his skull open and invite Will inside, he could do as much as consider the invitation. "Your counterpart told me that the whys are more useful than the hows. Is it the same for you?"

"The hows just show me where to look," Will said dully, recognizing it as something he'd said before.

"I'm offering to help you see further. To understand how and why he thinks. I can't help you catch him, but I can better arm you to do so."

Will bowed his head. He watched the rise and fall of his chest and stomach and how it pushed the blanket wrapped around him out by a few inches. "Why does he cannibalize his victims?"

"He told you he was an orphan to find a thread between you, and with Abigail Hobbs. It was a useful truth." There was scorn and even some recognition there, Will could hear it in his voice, but he didn't spare any time to collect himself. "My parents died immediately when the plane crashed, but my sister and I were spared with scrapes and bruises.

"Nothing grows in a Lithuanian winter. Even the birds seek warmer climates. The stores in our family's hunting cabin were depleted a week before they came."

Each word out of Hannibal's mouth brought him closer to the blazing white of blanketing snow, bare branches on twisted black trees, the huddled forms of two small children alone in

the world. Wind howled, and Will forced it to the back of his mind. He knew what came next. It was a foregone conclusion. It was cruel to make him continue.

"You don't have to—"

"If you want to know what he locks in the cellar of his mind, it has to be said." He softened a little, when he looked down at Will from whatever distraction the middle distance had held. Will in pain could move him, even when he wasn't the right Will. "Telling it isn't the same as living it. Not for me. You can save your kindness."

Will grudgingly nodded for him to keep going.

"My sister was very ill," he began again.

"What was her name?" Will interrupted.

He only thought to give a name to the girl whose death he would use as a weapon, but after he said it that he realized it was a lot to ask. Hannibal stalled for a moment, but it wasn't out of affront. "Mischa," he said eventually, and Will knew it was for the first time in years. "Her name was Mischa."

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When it was done, morning was close. A few of the dogs had roused and repositioned themselves to nearer to sources of warmth; Hannibal, now sitting in the desk chair again with Thaddeous in his lap, and Will, a dog on each side of his hip as he sat on the edge of the bed.

Whether it was a weight off of him or a burden lived anew, Will couldn't determine. In the silence after, he stroked Thaddeus and let Will process.

"What would you like to do now?" he asked after ten minutes or so, depositing Thaddeus to the floor and standing. Little clicks sounded as the dog circled him, urging for a treat.

"I don't know," Will said. His voice was still sore from talking earlier. "I have no idea."

"I can't leave you alone," Hannibal said, and without any apology. "But you should rest."

Will, as if dazed, glanced around at the dogs and the dark room and his skinny, tired body. He knew the moment of suspended memory, a rush of input, he'd been in for—minutes? hours? —was over, but the rest of him was sluggish still. What else was there to be said? *Either I wake up now, or I keep going. It doesn't matter.* "Yeah," he agreed. "That's probably a good idea."

"You should eat something else before you sleep. Something small," he promised, and strode to Will's fridge in the next breath.

The dog to his left yawned, hot breath on Will's wrist as it tucked around a furry body. "I don't know if I can."

"You know the reasons I must make you," Hannibal said, shifting glass bottles of jam, maybe, Will couldn't see him well from where he was, in his hands. "If you don't properly nourish it, your mind will betray you."

Will was sick of tacitly agreeing in his silence, but he was also aware of his own folly when he saw it.

Hannibal went about making him toast. He smeared a thin amount of apricot preserve on the single piece of bread, the same amount Will would, only enough to give it tang, and brought over a cup of milk with it. He wasn't at ease in Will's kitchen, not quite, but he was determined and familiar with it.

The cup of milk replaced the stone-cold tea on his nightstand. The plate of toast went on his lap, and he elbowed away a curious dog to nibble at the edge.

"Thank you," he said, crumbs on his lips and too skittery to look up and gauge a reaction. "Uh, for helping me. And I want to apologize for letting you think …" The rest of that escaped him. *That I'm the same? That I loved you? That I'm not a basket case? That you didn't make me sick to my stomach?*

"Whatever I experienced since your arrival here is inconsequential. It matters to me that you rest and take what you need."

It was a graceful way of letting Will off the hook, and Hannibal was sincere. Will considered his piece of toast and nodded at it, the hot feeling of tears rushing up behind his eyes but stopping short of falling. *Fuck.*

"While you sleep, I can search for theories as to how you might be returned to where you come from." He must have noticed Will's emotion but mercifully spared them both from addressing it. He kept them on the pretense of keeping busy, as futile as it was. "If you like."

"I don't think there's anything to do, necessarily. If I'm unconscious, it's a matter of waiting this out."

"And if you're not?" Hannibal asked.

"Then I guess you invent some kind of a quantum device to send me back to Chilton," Will tried to joke.

All Hannibal said, though there were shades of other responses on his tongue—all of them meant for a different Will Graham and inappropriate for the two of them—was, "Finish your toast."

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Before he retreated to the other end of the house with a pile of books and Will's laptop, he watched Will climb into bed, arranging covers around himself with stiff, cold limbs. Will's

body was reaching toward unconsciousness fast, and it was difficult to outrun it, to keep his thoughts in order.

The last thing Will remembered before succumbing was a last glance at Hannibal through slitted eyes; his worried, yearning face, and then *I wish it were me* as he turned his cheek into the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who waited for me to update—between the Hannigram Secret Santa, the holidays, and work deadlines, I was writing at a snail's pace.

All that's left is the epilogue, which should come quite a bit quicker than this did.

Thanks again to the usual suspects: Randstad for putting up with me, ac_123 for excellent pre-reader skillz, and to everyone IRL who listened to me bitch about having to finish the chapter.

(PS. Feel free to ask questions if you have any. The epilogue will answer some of it, and I'll probably write some tie-ins about the alternate Hannibal and Will, but I know there's tons of stuff left unanswered.)

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The lights in the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane were typically kept on a dimmer from 2130 to 0600 to allow for sleep, even if half of them only slept for jags at a time whenever things quieted down. Chilton sometimes ordered for the lights in a given patient's cell to stay on more indefinitely. Will's had once been kept on for thirty-two hours straight, though he knew others had easily beaten that record.

He'd learned over months what those ergonomic florescent lights did to him; they were like a hand ghosting across his skin and prickling the hairs there, or the itch of an uncomfortable blanket. They flickered on slowly but with inescapable heat and brightness, adding their hum to the tones of equipment he could hear giving low, sonar-like beeps in Barney's station—he preferred to think of it as Barney's station, as he was the only tolerable orderly in the place. *'Sounds better than nurse-slash-guard,'* was how Orderly Barney Matthews had introduced himself.

Will was feeling that itch again, hearing that hum. His heart rate increased immediately, but for once in the last six months of his life, the cause was something other than trepidation. Will pushed a grim smile into the edge of his pillowcase, bleachy and stiff, and took stock.

The same undershirt with other people's sweat baked into it from repeated cycles through the wash; the pain in his back from sleeping on the cot's lumpy, hard surface, not completely returned to him but threatening; the lights stinging his eyelids as if they were a harsh sun. He blinked his eyes open once he felt capable of it and knew it had been some hours since they'd come on. Barney was passing out breakfast; Will could hear murmuring, the rattling of the meal cart on its ancient wheels, and then the sound of the meal slot clanging shut and locking.

The kick of adrenalin was not quite ready to fade even though Will was accepting his return to a familiar hell.

It was a dream. Or it wasn't. There was no calendar in his cell. Until he got hold of one to determine if five days really had gone by, or just one night, it didn't matter. Just like Hannibal had said, it didn't matter. Will had taken a bet and was resting on it, waiting for its conclusion. He couldn't back out now.

Will rose from the cot mechanically, though it took some convincing to move his limbs without trembling. He was weak, easily weak enough to merit another of Chilton's interventions. Will's arms, usually capable of lugging around a boat motor like a yoke across his shoulders, were atrophying. *Food was his weapon; make it yours*, he reminded himself when his stomach clenched over his determination to fix himself.

Will didn't know exactly whose voice it was in his head, pushing him upwards. That threw him a little.

I'm not kind enough to wish you well. Picturing the inevitable reunion. Picturing Will Graham waking up in a proper bed, miles from here. All told, ignoring that was easy—he needed all the wellness he could get for himself and had nothing to spare.

Barney finally got to him with the cart. Will hadn't estimated enough time to conceal himself, to lay back down, to pull on his jumpsuit and hope its unflattering bulk covered his lack. But Barney's station with its eagle-eye cameras, and his hourly checks, meant Will was exposed anyway. He breathed to control himself, gentle huffs through his nose.

It doesn't matter what they do to you. Any potential intervention was just a detour. He could stand Barney's questions, his confusion about Will's rapidly shrinking body, and the corners of Chilton's mouth turned down in false concern as he lectured Will on measures taken for his well-being. He was on a narrow path and only had to pay tolls along the way to his destination.

"Hey, Barney," Will said. His throat was gritty with sleep, and he cleared it.

"It's nice to see you again this morning, Mr. Graham," Barney said carefully, standing his usual polite distance from the bars. His gaze was stuck to Will, and like Hannibal's—Lecter's—it missed nothing.

He'd watched Will piss on the security cameras and a few times in person, checked to make sure he was swallowing his meds, brought him soft paperback books even though Will hated nursing and mysteries, Barney's two preferred genres. Gave him impassive looks when Will refused food. Sighed and collected it, uneaten. Gave him little nods when Will managed half of a chicken breast. Of course he'd know. Chilton might take him out of his cell and escort him in hand and ankle cuffs to his office to sit through terrible therapy, but he didn't look at Will. Even when they decreased Chilton's morphine dose and he gained back most of his functioning, such as it was, he didn't see.

Barney saw everything.

"You too," Will said, his tongue practically sticking to the roof of his mouth. "I'm feeling … back to normal."

Barney didn't react to that. His gaze swept Will's cell, noted the uncharacteristically unmade cot, Will's body held stiff so it wouldn't tremble in his boxers and shitty undershirt. "I've got breakfast for you, and some mail," he said when it came back around to Will.

"Thanks," Will said. "Send it through."

A bowl of oatmeal with a dash of something rust colored that was probably cinnamon across the top. His stomach gave an unhappy gurgle, but he picked up the spoon and stirred it once Barney'd locked the slot again.

Will took a mouthful, ran his dry tongue through its lumpy blandness, and swallowed. He stirred again. There was orange juice and tepid water in wrinkled, flimsy paper cups; Will sipped the orange juice and did a very convincing job of not gagging. The back of his mouth watered, so he drank more juice.

"There's another thing," said Barney in the same measured, reasonable tone he'd been using.

"Oh?"

"Dr. Lecter is in a meeting with Dr. Chilton. He's been trying real hard to see you since that morning you … weren't yourself." He shifted, big feet in orthopedic sneakers nearly knocking into the cart. "If he's talking to Dr. Chilton again, I think I'd have a hard time keeping him out of here."

Will nodded. It wasn't a hard leap to make. The other Will—*against all fucking odds* —had seen the other Lecter. He'd probably had a meltdown. But he was quick enough to keep Lecter away for as long as he could, and knew Barney was the best way to do that. *I hope you were better at being me than I was at you*, he thought before tucking the information away to examine later.

"You can send him down here," Will said after appearing to mull it over. "After I get dressed."

He hoped he was right and that the jumpsuit would hide the worst of it. *It doesn't matter*, he told himself again, and picked up the spoon.

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He stood in the middle of the cell, sweaty fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. No matter what he told himself, his body barely had the strength to remain standing; he couldn't spare much to regulate its natural responses. Will slowed his breathing down again until it was scarcely audible.

Will could hear Lecter's footsteps in the hall, deliberate, designed to tread on his nerves.

When he came into view, Will forgot his sweaty hands and rabbit-thumping heart. He forgot what Lecter's face was supposed to look like, strange and aloof but human and privately kind. He thought he could smell him even from ten feet: good wool, spice, and the leather interior of his Bentley.

It rose up inside of him like a roar.

My name is Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I am the Chesapeake Ripper. The Copy Cat Killer. I am other things yet unnamed.

Hannibal's voice crept back into his head next, and Will wanted to shake it off like dirty water or a nosy fly—*you aren't the same, I don't need you here*—but he presented Will with something useful. *"His arrogance is his downfall. Use his brazenness. Use the fact that it's in his self-interest to stay far away from you, but he will not. He cannot."*

I'm back here because I can't stay away from Will Graham. I believe I know my own potential folly; it is worth the risk.

He came to stand in front of Graham's cage, the irritant of dealing with Chilton long faded now that he was standing in the halls of reality rather than retracing the more elaborate ones

of his own memory. Relief over the outcome implied gratitude—he was not relieved. He was satisfied with his renewed access.

I see him, and I know something is wrong; there was an aberration, and it is no longer there. It's been replaced with something new. There's no use hiding it, Will Graham. I can see the shape of you through your clothes as a tailor would. I know you cannot eat.

Lecter inclined his head politely in greeting. Graham stood silently, queerly, in the middle of his cell, sallow in his blue jumpsuit.

I won't be expecting Graham to know about Mischa. He should not know of her within the meticulous inventory of my mind. I do not know that I am seen. It will needle me. As Graham plants seeds of suggestion in Jack Crawford, in Alana Bloom, in Frederick Chilton, I still won't be able to alleviate it. I will examine each moment for clues—when, precisely, did I tell him I speak Japanese? When did I reveal my mother's name?

The bars were between them, but to him they had all but disappeared. He couldn't tell exactly who he was looking at; Lecter, Graham—rather, himself. Perhaps both; he could be Barney, eating a bagel and keeping an eye on the cameras. It was an uncertainty as to whether the smell of very expensive shampoo was trailing Lecter or somehow emanating from the cell, from Graham's lank curls. Curious.

I will search exhaustively, and I will find nothing.

"Good morning, Will."

When Will answered, he'd forced all the voices to a distant place. It was only him again. There was no vague smile, no inclination of his chin. Nothing that gave him away. Just Will Graham, awake and seeing and with his own architecture of memory to rely on. "Good morning, Dr. Lecter."

Chapter End Notes

I know thank yous become redundant after a while, but as a final and sincere role call: thank you, seriously, to M, to J, to other J (who is still catching up! /waves for when you belatedly see this), to Randy, and to ball. I could probably write in a void, but you make it worth it. <3

Finally, thanks to everyone who was patient and kind and interested in my weirdo brain and the fic it wants to produce. I love tropes and alternate realities and pretending to be dating stories, so I took all of that, scrambled it up, and hoped it was remotely engaging. It didn't come out how I envisioned it, but it was kind of a fun ride. I mentioned in the previous chapter, but I have some lingering ideas for loose ends to tie up; the alternate Will and Lecter got shafted in the scope of this story, for sure. And if there's something unanswered that you're super curious about, feel free to ask! (I know the ending is strange POV-wise, for one. Writing Will Graham is haaaard.)

Oh! And, speaking of alt!Hannigram, don't forget this ficlet set before "tag" proper: Tenerezza.

Planning, tentatively, to start something new and longish before season two starts airing, but we'll see.

End Notes

Coming soon: Will continues to investigate his own subconscious, if it's even his subconscious, but there's no way there's a universe where he's dating a non-murderous Hannibal Lecter, right? And what's with those session recordings? Will Graham has a weird brain.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!